

SERMON 28th June 2026

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

When I applied to become a minister, and went through the selection process, part of which involved an interview, I was asked a lot of questions. One of those questions brought me up short, made me think, perhaps even stumble, and it has remained with me throughout the past twenty-eight years. It is a question I draw the attention of students to as they begin their journeys to becoming ministers because it is the most important question in ministry, and also the most important question in life, in anyone's life.

The question I was asked was, "How much will you be sacrificing in order to become a minister?" In ministry, as I tell my students, someone must pay the price for your vocation. Who is going to have to pay, and how much will they have to pay?

That is not just true for those who seek to become ministers, nor is it just true of ministry as a vocation, in truth it is true for everyone in every walk of life. What have you sacrificed in your life to get where you are today? Or perhaps, equally important, what didn't you sacrifice, which you should have sacrificed, that explains why you are where you are today? What have you sacrificed in your life to get where you are today? Or what didn't you sacrifice, which you should have sacrificed, that explains why you are where you are today?

Perhaps you sacrificed some of your earnings in the past, and are now enjoying your pension. Perhaps, you are the person who sacrificed a lot for your career, or perhaps you are the one who sacrificed your career for your family. In life, the list of tasks that we could be doing is far greater than the time available to us, so we must sacrifice some things so that we can do others. Which things do we sacrifice, and which do we not?

The concept of sacrifice is not just an abstract idea; it has a universal significance. Without an understanding of sacrifice, we have no understanding of time. Watch a young child who can't properly imagine the future. If given the option, he or she won't even sacrifice two minutes of playtime to undertake the chore of cleaning their teeth, so immediate is the existence of the present, and so murky the possibility of a future, that the pain their future selves will suffer from tooth decay is of no interest to them. Once we understand that we have a future, we start to appreciate the importance of sacrifice. Once we appreciate the importance of sacrifice, we understand that the value of the future comes from the value of our sacrifices in the present.

Understanding the place of sacrifice in our lives is so important that, not surprisingly, it is brought to our attention at the very beginning of the Bible in the story of Cain and Abel, and at the end of the Bible in the story of Jesus Christ, and at many points in between. The story of Cain and Abel dramatizes the truth that the bigger the sacrifice we make today, the bigger the future reward. And it also dramatizes the uncertainty of the future. No matter, what you sacrifice today, future reward is not guaranteed; your sacrifice may not be accepted.

The more you put into your pension pot, the more you get back when you retire, unless, of course, the stock market crashes on the day you collect your gold watch. Sometimes, the cards don't fall in our favour. And the question is, what do we do then. Do we pick ourselves up and try again, or do we become like Cain; resentful, envious, jealous and murderous?

The understanding that, as a rule, the more we sacrifice today the bigger and better the possibility of a future return explains much in human culture, not just pensions. If we dig around in a peat bog, we may come across an ancient artifact of great beauty that was deposited there long ago by someone making a sacrifice of something very precious to a god of nature hoping that in return there will be a future bountiful harvest.

It is true that the more valuable our sacrifices today the more valuable the future return, then what if we sacrifice today the most valuable thing we could possibly imagine. A bit like putting your entire salary into your pension pot every year for thirty years, what then might your retirement be like?

What if we sacrificed today the most valuable thing we could possibly imagine? What then might our future be like? That is that question that the story we read this morning begins with.

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac — and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."¹

So begins one of the greatest stories in world literature, and a foundational story in Western literature. Feel the terrible and chilling dramatic tension rising. "Take your son," God says. Abraham has two sons, so Abraham can't choose his son, so he can safely ignore God's terrifying request. "Your only son," God says. Each one of Abraham's sons is the only son of their respective mother, so Abraham can't choose his only son, so he can safely ignore God's terrifying request. "[The one] whom you love," God says. Abraham loves both his sons, both the illegitimate one, Ishmael, and the legitimate one, Isaac. So, Abraham can't choose the son whom he loves, he loves them both so he can safely ignore God's terrifying request. "Isaac," God says.

What have we sacrificed in our lives to bring us to where we are today? What have we avoided sacrificing in our lives that has meant we are where we would not rather be? How much better would our future be if we are prepared to sacrifice today something of real value? If our future depends on the value of our sacrifices today, what if today we sacrificed that which is most precious to us?

Abraham was called by God to the work of the salvation of humanity. There is no greater task a person can take on than that. There is no better future than the salvation of all humanity. If Abraham is being called to be the one that begins the work of the future salvation of all humanity, and if that is the best possible future for humanity, then Abraham, God says, will have to sacrifice that which is most precious to him today, in the present. That which is most precious to Abraham in the present is his son, his only son, the one he loves, Isaac.

From that emotionally gut-wrenching beginning, the rest of the story unfolds in an equally dramatic way over a mere three hundred words. Its brevity is only a part of what makes this one of the greatest stories ever written. It's enigmatic telling where the reader is required to

¹ Genesis 22: 1 – 2

interpret for themselves what is happening beneath the surface creates suspense and psychological depth. The story proceeds with rising tension. Will the hero of the story really do something so terrible? Is it possible that what is unavoidable might be avoided? And if not, what are the consequences to us, the readers? Will we be able to read on? Will we be able to follow this God if Abraham does this, gains the future salvation of humanity, the greatest future of all, by sacrificing what is most precious to him today, his son, his only son, the one he loves, Isaac?

As I said earlier, this story is regarded as one of the greatest works of literature because it is a quintessential example of Old Testament narrative, and Old Testament narrative is one of the two fundamental influences on Western literature. The other is the work of the Greek poet Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey. The literature of the Old Testament and the literature of Homer are very different, but just about everything we read today in the 21st century is influenced by these two works of literature: Homer and the Old Testament.

An example of the best Homeric-style literature in the 20th century might be the work of Ernest Hemingway. Everything is on the surface: the action of this stories is laid out as a continuous narrative; the emotions and the motivations of the characters are made clear; the past, present and future are separate narratives within the story.

An example of the best Old Testament-style literature in the 20th century might be the novels of Muriel Spark. Very little is on the surface. The reader must read between the lines and interpret. The action is constructed to build dramatic tension. Emotions and motivations of characters are hidden. The past, present, and future form a continuous narrative each influencing the other.

If you want to appreciate the literary significance of this story we read this morning, read this afternoon two short novels, *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and contrast them.

But, we are not here to read the Bible as literature. We are here to be transformed by the Bible's theological significance. So, we need to know less about how this story proceeds as a narrative, and more about its significance and consequence. At the end of the story, as we know, Abraham doesn't sacrifice his son, his only son, the one he loves, Isaac. God provides an appropriate sacrifice in place of Isaac. God provides.

It is true that God asks us to make sacrifices in life so that we can have a future, and a future that is better than the present, and a lot better than the past. If we want a future, we must make sacrifices. It is true too, that sometimes God will not accept our sacrifices, as God didn't accept Cain's sacrifice because we haven't sacrificed appropriately, something of value today for a better future return.

For example, if you have been feeling too hot this past week, that is because, when it came to fossil fuels, we didn't make the appropriate sacrifices in the past, and that is why we are having to deal with climate change – its effects, its costs, its damage – today in the present. What's more, we will have to make bigger and more valuable sacrifices today, if we want a world that is habitable tomorrow.

But, less we think we too much is being asked of us, less we think that we are going to have to sacrifice that which we love, the story of Abraham and Isaac tells us that so long as we are prepared to do what we have to do, God will never ask more of us than we can bear.

That is true, not just of sacrifices, but of all things in life. When we face life with all its suffering, loss, pain, and tragedy. If we are prepared to look at it square in the eye and step forward into the future carrying our crosses, bearing our burdens, a lot will be asked of us, but God will not ask us to carry what we cannot, to bear what is impossible, to do something that is unthinkable.

That is not an invitation to evade our responsibilities, but instead a requirement to take them on. For as terrible as this life can be, we are each up to the task of living it, and moving forward, and moving up, and facing what needs to be faced, coping with what needs to be coped with, bearing what needs to be born because God is merciful, and instead of asking of us what we cannot do, God will never ask more of us than we can bear. God will provide.