

How Could He Be So Sure?

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



One of the readings for January 24, Hebrews 11: 17-23, recalls a story from the Old Testament that is for some people a stumbling block: God telling Abraham, in Genesis 22, to sacrifice his only son Isaac on Mount Moriah.

For those who are eager to portray the God of Christians as a violent figure without compassion, unworthy of worship or even respect, the story in Genesis provides a good deal of ammunition. Here is God asking a father to kill his beloved son, for no apparent reason except to show his own godly power. Then the same God, the critics of Christianity say, will one day demand his own son's death on the cross. Bob Dylan included the Genesis episode in one of his songs, suggesting that God threatened severe consequences if Abraham didn't do what was commanded. Dylan puts these words in God's mouth: "You can do what you want, Abe, but the next time you see me coming you better run."

Dylan's lyrics don't reflect what really happens in the Old Testament story, with its suspense and drama. First there is the poignant description of Isaac as "your son, your only son, whom you love." Then comes the journey to the mountain, with Abraham cutting and gathering the wood for the fire that will consume the sacrifice. Young Isaac's innocent question, once the fire and wood have been prepared, chills the heart: "...but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" When Abraham actually reaches for the knife to kill Isaac, and the angel stays his hand, horror is followed by great relief.

The Letter to the Hebrews presents the story from Genesis as one example of Abraham's faith. Preceding verses describe other examples, first his setting out for an unknown land that God promised, and then his living with his family as sojourners in a foreign land. His wife Sarah's faith is also described. She is old and childless, yet is given the ability to conceive "because she considered him faithful who had promised" (11:11). The result is "descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore" (11:12).

But before all those innumerable descendants came Isaac, and Abraham's faith in God's promises is the key to his willingness to sacrifice his cherished son. He had seen God fulfill His promises, and he knew "that God was able to raise men even from the dead" (11:19). God had told Abraham (Genesis 17:21) that He would establish His covenant with Isaac. So Abraham could be sure He would keep that promise as well.

This is the faith that Bob Dylan and others fail to see in the story. But the Church Father Melito of Sardis sees it as a promise to us as well as to Abraham. He writes that Christ "was bound with Isaac." Both were bound, and both were restored to their fathers. Now we can also be sure that, in ways we may not anticipate, God's promises will be fulfilled.