

## Lent09.2

Not often but at times there are readings from the Scriptures which we just cannot accept. You remember the parable of the owner of the vineyard who paid the same wage to those who worked one hour and those who worked the whole day. Despite an explanation which attempted to show that this discrepancy in pay was meant to describe God's generosity, a woman at a Mass I celebrated years ago told me that she just could not accept this parable. It was an injustice to pay the same wage to these two very different groups of workers, she said, and that was all there was to it. She would not be budged from her position.

I have the same reaction to today's first reading from Genesis. No matter how it is explained, I am not going to accept a God who demands that a father sacrifice his son. It is inhuman. Down through the ages many people have had trouble with this passage. Some rabbis have explained it away by saying that Abraham misunderstood the divine command, that God did not really ask that of him. They also explain that the passage's purpose is to show that the God of Israel, unlike the gods of the people surrounding the Jews, did not accept human sacrifice. But perhaps in ancient times the Jews were like their neighbors and did offer

their children in sacrifice. What is unquestionable, however, is that many religions have had human sacrifice as part of their rituals. We think of the people of ancient Mexico who did this, tearing the heart out of the victim and offering it to God. Why? Because life was precious and therefore should be offered to God. And what could be more precious than the life of one's own child, one's son.

But I am sorry to say that this business of human sacrifice plays a part in our religion as well. True, Christian faith in no way approves of human sacrifice. It is a religion which stresses the preciousness of life. It preaches a God who is life and love. It preaches that we are all promised resurrection after death because, as Jesus himself said, God is a God of the living, not of the dead. All are alive for Him. Nevertheless, we cannot deny what Paul says in today's second reading from his Letter to the Romans: "Brothers and sisters: If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not give us everything else along with him?" He did not spare his own son. Thus, what we will not allow on the human level, the sacrifice of one's son, we have to allow on the divine level. We have to admit that our faith teaches us that God sacrificed his son for our sake. And we have to say that the Son

accepted his own sacrifice willingly. He ratified the will of his father. He gave up his life for us. That fact makes this belief a little more palatable. The victim is mature, the victim is willing. He is not imposed upon by the will of his father.

And why did the Father and Son think that such a sacrifice was necessary? That is a huge question. Here we are dealing with the mystery of the cross. Jewish and Christian faith both teach us that we humans had become estranged from God. We had turned away from him and put ourselves in one form or another in God's place, and God in his love wanted to remove this sinful condition. But given the fact that He had created us as free persons, as those who could dialogue with him, as those who could accept or reject his offer of love and friendship, it seems that the only way God could remove this estrangement was to become part of it and as part of it put us back on the right path through the use of human freedom. And so we have Jesus, the son of God but also human, who removed our sinfulness by saying yes to God in his own human life. But this yes, because it is said in the midst of a sinful situation, is subject to its sinfulness and therefore undergoes terrible suffering. All sin is a form of hatred, for oneself and others, and hatred cannot be overcome by hatred but only by its opposite, love. Love must suffer hatred to overcome it.

This is what Jesus preached; this is what he lived. During his life he called hatred and sin by their proper names, but in the end he submitted to them in order to rob them of their power, of their very selves.

“Sweet the word, sweet the nails,” the Church has sung for centuries. This sweetness is the power of love when it submits to its opposite and overcomes it. God did not sacrifice his Son against the Son’s will. No, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit surrendered themselves to human hatred and thereby overcame it in and through Jesus’ human will. And that is what we commemorate when we look at the cross and repeat to ourselves the words which Paul wrote to the Galatians 2:20: He (Jesus) loved me and gave himself up for me.” Confronted with such divine love, we cannot but say thank-you and attempt to return it.