

A detail from Michelangelo's 'The Pietà' showing the Virgin Mary, the Christ Child, and St. John the Apostle. Mary is seated on the right, wearing a blue mantle over an orange gown, looking down at the Christ Child. The Christ Child is lying on his back, his body marked with wounds, including a visible wound on his side. St. John the Apostle is seated on the left, looking down at the Christ Child. The background is dark and indistinct.

Pietà

LENTEN PROGRAM 2024

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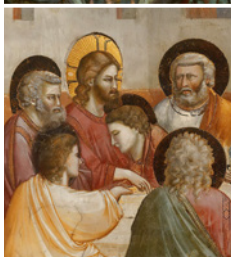
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2nd
SUNDAY
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Beloved

25 FEBRUARY 2024

2nd Sunday of Lent

GENESIS 22:1–2, 9–13, 15–18

PSALM 115–10, 15–19

ROMANS 8:31–34

MARK 9:2–10

OPENING PRAYER

Host: Let us pause and call to mind
God's presence within and
among us, today and always.

Brief pause.

All: Transfigure our hearts into the likeness
of your own heart, Father. Grant us the
grace to recognise you as you reveal
yourself to us in all whom you send
our way. We ask this through your
Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

FIRST READING



GENESIS 22:1–2, 9–13, 15–18

God put Abraham to the test. “Abraham,
Abraham” he called. “Here I am” he replied.
“Take your son,” God said “your only child Isaac,
whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah.
There you shall offer him as a burnt offering,
on a mountain I will point out to you.”

When they arrived at the place God had pointed out
to him, Abraham built an altar there, and arranged
the wood. Then he bound his son Isaac and put him
on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched
out his hand and seized the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven.
“Abraham, Abraham” he said. “I am here” he replied.
“Do not raise your hand against the boy” the angel
said. “Do not harm him, for now I know you fear
God. You have not refused me your son, your only
son.” Then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught
by its horns in a bush. Abraham took the ram and
offered it as a burnt-offering in place of his son.

The angel of the Lord called Abraham a second time
from heaven. “I swear by my own self—it is the Lord
who speaks—because you have done this, because
you have not refused me your son, your only son,
I will shower blessings on you, I will make your
descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the
grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants
shall gain possession of the gates of their enemies.
All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by
your descendants, as a reward for your obedience.”

The word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM



PSALM 115–10, 15–19

R I will walk before the Lord,
in the land of the living.

I trusted, even when I said,
“I am sorely afflicted.”
How precious in the eyes of the LORD
is the death of his faithful. **R**

Your servant, LORD, your servant am I,
the son of your handmaid;
you have loosened my bonds.
A thanksgiving sacrifice I make;
I will call on the name of the LORD. **R**

My vows to the LORD I will fulfill
before all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem. **R**

GOSPEL



MARK 9:2–10

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and
led them up a high mountain where they could be
alone by themselves. There in their presence he
was transfigured: his clothes became dazzlingly
white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make
them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and
they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter spoke to
Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said “it is wonderful for us to be
here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for
Moses and one for Elijah.” He did not know what
to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came,
covering them in shadow; and there came a voice
from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen
to him.” Then suddenly, when they looked round,
they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus.

As they came down from the mountain he
warned them to tell no one what they had seen,
until after the Son of Man had risen from the
dead. They observed the warning faithfully,
though among themselves they discussed
what “rising from the dead” could mean.

The Gospel of the Lord.

All: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.

Pause for silent reflection.

REFLECTING ON THE READINGS THROUGH ART

with Msgr Graham Schmitzer



Sacrifice of Isaac

Harmenszoon van Rijn Rembrandt (1606–1669)
“Sacrifice of Isaac” (1635)

Oil on canvas, 193cm x 132cm.

The New Hermitage Museum, Room 254, Saint Petersburg, Russia. Public Domain.

Before today’s reading from the book of Genesis, God once more enters the history of his people offering a Covenant. “Do not be afraid, Abram! I am your shield.... I brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this country as your possession” (Gn 15:1,7). “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can. Just so will your descendants be” (Gn 15:5). Abram (his original name), formerly a pagan, put his faith in a yet unknown God. With a play-on-words, God “cuts” a Covenant with him. Abram falls into a deep sleep—showing that God is the principal actor—and has a vision of God moving between the half-cut carcasses of animals Abram has slaughtered.

It was an ancient form of contract, meaning that if either party were to break the contract, may they be like those slaughtered animals. Later, God says: “Live in my presence” (Gn 17:1).

We know, of course, that no matter how often we break the Covenant, God will always be faithful. It is the point of today’s reading from Genesis. It begins: “God put Abraham (his new name) to the test” (Gn 22:1). True faith is always tested. But what a test! How can God’s promise to Abraham be reconciled with what he is now asking? Now, it’s good to remember that God certainly did not want the sacrifice of Isaac or of any other child—this was considered an abomination in Israel. It was what pagans did to “appease” their angry gods. God did not desire the death of his own Son either. Christ’s death was a result of mankind’s sinfulness. But even this could not thwart God’s plan to draw us to himself.

It is good to read the whole of Chapter 2 of Genesis.

The lectionary reading is a bit truncated. The dialogue between

Abraham and Isaac as they mount the hill of Moriah is heart wrenching—“My father,” “My son,” they address each other. The early Christians immediately saw Isaac carrying the wood for his own sacrifice as a foreshadowing of Jesus’ carrying of his cross to the hill of Calvary. It is interesting to note that while the two events are separated in time by 2,000 years, the two locations are only a matter of a few yards from each other. The Jerusalem Temple has been replaced by Islam’s Dome of the Rock, thought by many to be the actual rock of Abraham’s sacrifice.

If Abraham and God the Father, and Isaac and Jesus, are to be compared, there is an enormous contrast. Abraham was given back his son—but there would be a sacrifice, one which God himself would provide. “Where is the lamb for the offering?” Isaac asks his father. “My son, God himself will provide the lamb” (Gn 22:7-8). Abraham’s knife would be replaced by the centurion’s lance.

We know, of course, that no matter how often we break the Covenant, God will always be faithful.

We can only imagine the scene that followed—an Old Testament Pietà of an elderly man weeping, hugging his beloved son in gratitude and overwhelming love. Compare this with Mary, Abraham's daughter. Her faith, too, was severely tested, but more so. She is hugging the limp body of her only Son, the Lamb who was Isaac's substitute. Because Mary's faith did not waver between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we dedicate each Saturday to her in the liturgy. On the lips of both Abraham and Mary the Church places the words of today's responsorial psalm: "I trusted, even when I said: 'I am sorely afflicted'" (Ps 115:10).

The whole point of today's liturgy is that if Abraham is outstanding in his faithfulness to God (we call him "our father in faith" in the Eucharistic Prayer), how much more extraordinary is God in his faithfulness to us? This is St Paul's argument. Many think of God as somehow against us, ready to punish when we don't get things right. We imagine we're out there on the stage of life doing our song and dance routine, trying to win God's approval. Perhaps he will applaud, perhaps he will give us the gong! God then becomes an alien figure—the ultimate drama critic.

This is clearly not the view of St Paul! It's precisely his concern in the second reading to say that God is *not* like that. God is on our side, so on our side, so faithful to us, that he was prepared to give up his own Son so that we might live. And this while we had abandoned him through sin! If ever we thought of God as judge, he certainly isn't a "hanging judge." Rather, his mind is made up for acquittal, and Paul adds, if that is the case, who would be brash enough to come before such as judge and try to prosecute us?

If heaven is pictured as a court, and we know we must face God in death, then we have the assurance we have *two* barristers. "[Christ] not only died for us"—in our place, for he took our

sins upon himself—"at God's right hand he stands and pleads for us" (Rm 8:34). "Let us, then, have no fear in approaching the throne of grace to receive mercy," writes the author of the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 4:16). And what is Christ's plea for us? "Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing," (Lk 23:24), and he shows his Father the signs of his victory—his sacred wounds.

The second barrister? "I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete (or Advocate) ... he is with you, he is in you" (Jn 14:16–17). St Paul is not saying that we may live careless and indifferent lives because God will let us off in the end. He is saying that he so loves us, that if we can accept that God is on our side, then our relationship with him will not be filled with fears and scruples, but with confidence and love.

No doubt the community in which St Mark lived experienced the same fears, the same problems we do today. If Christ Our Lord has all this power, why doesn't he use it to heal our diseases, remove our poverty, and bring us peace? St Mark's response was not a series of easy answers, but a hard look at our Lord's rejection and suffering. In preaching the Good News of God's love, Jesus necessarily met with opposition from the evil

forces which still try to control the earth. We don't know why God allows evil, but as it was part of our Lord's experience, so it is of ours.

Like the other evangelists, Mark includes in his Gospel the account of the Transfiguration. Not only was it an assurance for the three apostles, it was an assurance also for Jesus that evil will not win out; it was an assurance that we are all "beloved" of the Father, and that our salvation lies in listening to the Son (Mk 9:7). "Live in my presence," God had told Abraham" (Gn 17:1).

The Preface of the Mass of the feast of the Transfiguration (6 August) spells out its meaning for us. "For he revealed his glory in the presence of chosen witnesses ... that he might show how in the Body of the whole

Abraham's knife would be replaced by the centurion's lance. We can only imagine the Old Testament Pietà that followed—an elderly man weeping, embracing his beloved son in overwhelming love, a poignant parallel to Mary's profound faith tested through her own trials.

continued ►



**“Do not raise your
hand against the boy”**

GN 22:12

Church is to be fulfilled what so wonderfully shone first in its Head.” Sin and suffering and death are not the final page of the story.

Rembrandt's painting, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635), hangs in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. Hopefully, Westerners will one day soon be able to see it again. Rembrandt painted it when he was 29 years old—the same year that his first son was born and then died in infancy, a fact that lends a special poignancy to the subject of the painting.

Rembrandt Harmenszoon Van Rijn was born in 1606 in Leiden in the Netherlands. At the beginning of his artistic journey, Rembrandt primarily focused on painting portraits, including self-portraits. However, the majority of his work revolves around biblical themes, with some pieces also exploring historical, mythological, and allegorical subjects. His talent was quickly recognised by art enthusiasts in the Netherlands, and he gained significant acclaim. Rembrandt's unique storytelling ability allowed him to skilfully capture people in different emotional states and dramatic roles, establishing him as one of the greatest storytellers in the history of art.

This is so obvious in his depiction of the drama on Mount Moriah. In Abraham's face we see both the anguish of a father about to murder his son, and the surprise and confusion of a human confronting the divine. Abraham has

shielded Isaac's face completely with his left hand. This action reveals that Abraham could not bear the thought of his beloved son actually witnessing his own father raising and lowering the knife that would harm him. Abraham's love for his son was so deep that he couldn't proceed with the act while looking at his son's face.

Abraham could not bear the thought of his beloved son actually witnessing his own father raising and lowering the knife that would harm him. Abraham's love for his son was so deep that he couldn't proceed with the act while looking at his son's face.

The angel is looking directly at Isaac's covered face as he cries out: “Do not raise your hand against the boy” (Gn 22:12). He grabs Abraham's right hand, causing the knife to fall. Abraham, who intentionally avoided looking at Isaac's face, now directs his gaze towards the angel. The angel, who appears to be around the same age as Isaac, captures Abraham's attention. As one critic remarked, “[Abraham has] the look of a madman unexpectedly

paroled from hell.” When observed closely, one can notice tears of compassion streaming down Abraham's face. According to Kierkegaard's interpretation of this event, Abraham's obedience required a “leap of faith.” This means that Abraham had to trust and have faith in God's plan, even though it seemed difficult or incomprehensible.

MGR GRAHAM SCHMITZER

VISIO DIVINA

(see Page 18 for instructions)

The musical adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* begins with a Tim Minchin song: "My mummy says I'm a miracle. My daddy says, I'm his special little guy. I am a princess, I am a prince. Mum says I'm an angel sent down from the sky." The song lyrics form an ironic contrast with the story of Matilda, an unwanted child whose remarkable intelligence is not just ignored, but sneered upon by her parents.

Applied to the two sons who sit at the centre of today's readings, these lyrics become less the overstated endearments of doting parents, and perhaps almost accurate. Isaac, the son in the first reading, was miraculously born to his mother when she was over 90 and his parents had given up all hope of a natural heir. Jesus, the Beloved Son of the second reading and the Gospel, is literally the Son of God, miraculously born of a virgin.

Unlike Matilda, whose parents eventually abandon her, both Jesus and Isaac were obviously deeply cherished by their parents. And yet, Isaac was almost, and Jesus was actually, given up as a sacrifice by their respective fathers. What on earth is going on?

If we can step aside from the horrifying details of what almost happened, the story of Abraham and Isaac is actually a pretty amazing story of how much Abraham loved and trusted God—that he would be willing to sacrifice his long-awaited son at God's request. God's 11th-hour reprieve, in fact, confirmed that God was who Abraham knew him to be—compassionate, trustworthy, and provident.

In Jesus' case, there was no last-minute reprieve. He actually died. And unlike Isaac, who appeared not to know what was going on, Jesus went willingly to the cross. However, the motivating force in both stories was the same: love. Abraham

was willing to sacrifice his son because he loved God. God gave up his Beloved Son (and Jesus gave up his life) because he loves us.

Which points us to a third beloved child—you and me! If we had started the second reading just a couple of verses before, we'd have heard that God's whole purpose in giving up his Beloved Son was so that he might be the eldest of many brother and sisters—us!

Whether we were cherished like Isaac or discarded like Matilda, I suspect that most of us struggle, sometimes because of stories like

the one about Abraham and Isaac today, to know God as our loving Father and ourselves as beloved sons and daughters.

The disciples' experience of the Transfiguration was a crucial moment that helped them to understand that the man, Jesus, wasn't just another prophet, but God himself come among us.

As both God and man, he reveals to us both what God is really like, and who we really are. If we "listen to him", as today's Gospel asks us to do, we will notice that

every word that he speaks, every miracle, every action, shows us one, or both, of these things. In him, we experience both the compassion of the Father and what it looks like to live out of our true identity as beloved sons and daughters.

Perhaps if you're up for adding another Lenten goal, it might be worth taking up the Gospels and reading them just for yourself, looking at the miracles and actions of Jesus, listening to his words, and asking the Holy Spirit to help us to see and hear in them both the compassion of the Father and what it looks like to live out of our true identity as beloved sons and daughters.

KATHERINE STONE MGL

As both God and man, he reveals to us both what God is really like, and who we really are. If we 'listen to him,' as today's Gospel asks us to do, we will notice that every word that he speaks, every miracle, every action, shows us one, or both, of these things.

Friday of the 3rd week of Lent
FRIDAY 8 MARCH 2024

HOSEA 14:2–10
PSALM 80(81):6, 8–11, 14, 17
MARK 12:28–34

Come back to me with all your heart. HS 14:2.

The young scribe in today's Gospel who asked Jesus: "Which is the first of all the commandments?" (Mk 12:28) was clearly searching for God and seeking him with all his heart. It is a question that flows from the heart of every sincere believer who is genuinely seeking God. Since Jesus himself says, "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (Jn.14:15), it is a question that not only underpins the entire Law of God, but is the reason we seek God with all our heart and strive to follow him. So, when Jesus told the scribe it was to love the Lord our God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourself, and he understood this, Jesus responded: "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mk 12:34).

The command to love God is not a duty that can be forced upon us, or something we do because we have been told to. Loving God is a privilege freely offered to us when he embraces us in a personal relationship with him at Baptism, but will only grow and deepen when we freely accept his words and teachings, and open ourselves to his love and grace in our lives. And this will only happen as we gradually align our will to his will through the countless and often small decisions we make in our daily lives, seeking him "with all our heart".

God is constantly reaching out to us, but we must freely respond to him if, like the young scribe, we wish to find the wisdom he did and come close to the kingdom of God—come close, that is, to Jesus himself in whom the Kingdom is made present.

Jesus, help me to recognise the many ways and signs you reach out to me, and to respond with love and not simply duty. Mary, my Mother, help me to say with you, "fiat", with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. Amen.

FR CHRISTOPHER G SARKIS

Saturday of the 3rd week of Lent
SATURDAY 9 MARCH 2024

HOSEA 5:15–6:6
PSALM 50(51):3–4, 18–21
LUKE 18:9–14

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner" LK 18:13

Recently I saw a Japanese film, *Fragments of the Last Will*. Based on a true story, it concerned the plight of some Japanese soldiers who were made prisoners at the end of the Second World War living in various camps in Siberia.

The main character, Hatao Yamamoto, was a man of great gentleness and kindness. It was because of the way he interacted with his fellow prisoners that so much in them was set free. He was eternally understanding of their weaknesses; he was respectful and non-judgemental in the face of their absolute betrayal. He went the extra mile and took their sufferings on himself, paying the price in terms of cruel beatings and isolation. He forgave; he held no grudge.

Yamamoto's compassion never left him. He refused to give into the temptation to be less than human, even when treated as less than human, and he exhorted his fellow prisoners to be the same. He held what was dear to them as dear to himself, so when one of their number was killed, he held a clandestine memorial service to allow all to mourn. One by one they owned the skeletons in their various cupboards, they admitted to the ways they had fallen short in life—to their sinfulness. They came to terms with what they had done, and despite their surroundings, they found freedom to be people of goodness.

This is what God does for us. When you and I continue to go to him, opening ourselves to his utter kindness and understanding in our regard, when we go with an open heart, when we allow God to love us, we will find ourselves in glorious freedom calling out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And it will not be some sort of self-inflicted diminishment, it will be as a bird set free: "Yes, I am a sinner, someone who has missed the mark, and someone who has therefore earned the eternally compassionate smile of God." Today we can be like him and allow that to happen for someone else, too, just as Hatao Yamamoto did.

Lord be merciful to me a sinner. Amen.

MOTHER HILDA SCOTT OSB

Saint Patrick

MONDAY 18 MARCH 2024

JEREMIAH 1:4–9
PSALM 116(117)
ACTS 13:46–49
LUKE 10:1–12, 17–20

The kingdom of God is very near. LK 10:9, 11

Jesus appoints 72 others and sends them out ahead of him to preach to the towns and places he, himself, was to visit. He says that whenever you go into a town and they make you welcome, say to them, “The kingdom of God is very near to you.” When a person welcomes the one whom Christ has sent, they are effectively welcoming Christ into their lives and hearts.

But then, somewhat surprisingly, Jesus goes on to say to the 72 that when you enter a town and they do not make you welcome, you are also to say to them, “The kingdom of God is very near.” Regardless of whether the 72 are made to feel welcome in a particular town, regardless of whether the Gospel message is well received, the kingdom of God is still very near to the people.

Jesus is telling us that the kingdom of God is being brought to everyone, it is near everyone, within our grasp, but it is up to us whether we want to receive that kingdom. We have a choice. We have the power and freedom to welcome God into our lives, or to reject God from our lives.

In the book of Revelation, Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to them and eat with them, and they with me” (Rv 3:20). This invitation of Jesus is captured in a painting by William Holman Hunt, titled, *The Light of the World*. The painting depicts Jesus carrying a lantern, standing at a door, about to knock. But the outside of the door has no handle. The handle is only found on the inside, indicating that Jesus cannot open the door from the outside. The door can only be opened from the inside. We have to open our hearts and invite Jesus inside.

Lord, may I open up my heart to receive you through prayer, the sacraments, and through opening the door of my heart to the poor: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Amen.

FR ANTONY JUKES OFM

St Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary

TUESDAY 19 MARCH 2024

2 SAMUEL 7:4–5, 12–14, 16
PSALM 88(89):2–5, 27, 29
ROMANS 4:13, 16–18, 22
MATTHEW 1:16, 18–21, 24

He did what the angel of the Lord told him to do. MT 1:24

St Joseph’s life reminds us that Jesus did not preach a prosperity Gospel in which I can enjoy a life of success and comfort if I declare myself a follower of Christ. Rather, God asks us to be faithful to him regardless of whether we experience success in this life. We, as saints-in-the-making, belong to a long line of saints who were crucified, beheaded, burnt, poor, abandoned, imprisoned, misunderstood, ostracised and more! Never do we find a saint of which it is said. “He made a lot of money, had a long life of unmitigated bliss, and everyone liked him.”

St Joseph had a very confusing start to his marriage, lived as a refugee for a time, and worked hard to support his family. Yet, he also knew the peace of living a supernatural adventure: knowing God in Jesus, sharing life with him in his own home and daily routine. St Joseph does not choose self-referential accomplishment, but chooses to faithfully do what God asks of him. He chooses fidelity over success and comfort. His fidelity made a way for a prosperous eternal future for all who would come to know his Son, Jesus.

If we welcome Christ into our lives like St Joseph did, we will know profound joy, peace and freedom, but it will be of the supernatural order, not the purely natural order. This peace will arise in the midst of the confusion and disappointments that punctuate this life.

Lord Jesus, grant me the same grace of quiet faithfulness to your plan for my life as you gave to St Joseph. Amen.

SR ANASTASIA REEVES OP