

QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

7th February 2016

“Take thy son Isaac whom thou lovest, and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”

– *Genesis 22:2.*



If you are busily trying to find this quotation in your missals, I'll tell you right now that it isn't there. This mysterious and troubling passage, in which God commands Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, comes neither from the epistle or the Gospel of today's Mass – but it does help us to understand both these readings. This passage from Genesis was sung today at Matins, the Church's solemn night office.

Today's liturgy calls Abraham the “Father of our faith” (1st Vespers, Magnificat antiphon). You might think it is strange to call this patriarch of the ancient Jews the Father of the Christian faith, and yet, Our Lord himself clearly said to the unbelieving Jews of his own day, “If you be the children of Abraham, do the works of Abraham” (St. John 8:39), adding, “Abraham your father rejoiced that he might see my day: he saw it, and was glad” (*ibid.*, v. 56).

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was a foretaste of Christ's Passion, so clearly predicted in today's Gospel. The Old Testament predicts Christ's Passion in many places, which is why today Our Lord told the Apostles, “all things shall be accomplished which were written by the prophets concerning the Son of man” (St. Luke 18:31). In the Old Testament there are prophetic *words* and prophetic *actions*. The sacrifice of Isaac was a prophetic *action*: a beloved only son carries wood on his back to the mountain of sacrifice to be offered by his father, but in the end death does not have the last word.

We can see the divinity of the Christian faith through two main things: prophecies and miracles. We find both of them together in today's Gospel. Prophecies are predictions of future events which unaided human power could never imagine, but which God, truth itself, can reveal: Christ was predicted by the prophets of old, and he himself was greater than any prophet. In today's Gospel Our Lord makes a very clear prophecy of his own upcoming Passion: “[the Son of Man] shall be delivered to the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and scourged, and spit upon: and after they have scourged him, they will put him to death; and the third day he shall rise again” (St. Luke 18:32-33). Then comes the miracle: outside the city gates a poor blind man calls out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me” (St. Luke 18:38) and his sight is restored.

Let's concentrate on the second part of this Gospel: the miracle of the blind man, and above all, the prayer of the blind man, since it was his prayer which moved Our Lord to restore his sight. As you know, we are just a few days away from the beginning of Lent. Now is the time for us to make good resolutions about how we intend make the most of this holy time, especially by improving our prayer life. The blind man's prayer teaches us the essential qualities of authentic prayer: it is prompt and it is persevering. In Lent our goal should not simply to be to pray more in terms of quantity but above all to improve the quality of our prayer by imitating the blind man in today's miracle.

The blind man's prayer is *prompt*, because as soon as he learns that Our Lord is passing by he cries out to him. If he had waited, he would never have received his miracle. Procrastination is one of the greatest enemies of our spiritual life. Saint Expeditus was a Roman soldier in Armenia. When he decided to convert to Christianity, the devil tried to make him put off his conversion by sending a raven to bother him: the raven's cry *cras! cras!* ringing in his ears sounded like the Latin word for "tomorrow." But Saint Expeditus refused this temptation; that is why, in art, he is represented crushing a raven with his foot. We cannot put off our conversion. "Today if you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Psalm 94:8). It is sometimes said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions: the trouble is, if we delay our conversion, that saying could turn out to be literally true.

The poor man's prayer is also *perseverant*. Even though Our Lord does not seem at first to take any notice of him, and the crowds try to silence him, he continues to cry out. "Son of David, have mercy on me" (St. Luke 18:39). The Fathers of the Church tell us that these crowds represent all our bad memories and imaginations that flood into our minds to distract us from prayer. When we are distracted at prayer, we ought to think of the perseverance of this poor blind man and humbly call out like him, "have mercy on me."

Prayer that is prompt and persevering can be summed up in one word: *confident*. And that brings us back to the holy patriarch Abraham who, as I said, is the special patron the Church gives us during this week of transition to Lent. Confident prayer is based on faith, real living faith: the complete acceptance of God's word in our life – regardless of the mockery of others or the hesitations of our own mind. Listen to what St. Paul tells us about Abraham's faith: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son ... [for] he considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

The faith that springs forth in confident prayer is a faith that leads to real love of God. That is the whole point of today's epistle: if we do not have true love of God – called charity – the vigour of our faith and the splendour of our works will come to nothing. By faith we believe in what we cannot see, and by hope we desire what we do not yet possess; but in heaven there is no longer faith or hope, since in heaven the saints no longer have to believe what they can now see, nor desire what they now possess. And so the epistle tells us: “faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity” (I Corinthians 13:13). Charity alone remains in heaven. Faith is the *beginning* of our salvation, not the end. Here too Abraham is our model. In the words of the epistle of James: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, offering up Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou, that faith did co-operate with his works; and by works faith was made perfect? ... Do you see that by works a man is justified; and not by faith only?” (St. James 2:21-24). As you know, Protestants hold that we can never actually become holy but that by faith Christ simply covers our sins with his merits and pretends not to see them. This is why Luther dared to remove the epistle of St. James from the New Testament when he translated the Bible into German, since it explicitly contradicts his theory of salvation by faith alone.

This Lent, as we prepare to go up to Jerusalem where the Son of Man is to be crucified for our sins, let us turn to Abraham and the blind man and ask them for the same confident faith that made their prayers pleasing to God. The light which the Saviour will grant to cure our blindness will be the rays of new life shining forth from the Easter tomb.