

HOM 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent 2024 B Feb 25

Today's first reading is about God's fourth Covenant offer to Man of oneness with Himself.

Recently, I summarized for you God's seven covenant offers to Man – six in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament i.e., the New and Everlasting Covenant – each one made through one or more individuals: i.e., Adam and Eve, their immediate descendants, Noah, Abraham, Moses, King David, and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I also invited you to see these seven covenants as God's courtship of Man – at first offering Man friendship with Himself, and then a deeper sharing in His life, step by step – covenant offer by covenant offer -- “dating”, “going steady”, “pre-engagement” -- and finally a “marriage proposal” to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and resulting in a mystical but true marriage in, through, and with Jesus Christ.

It really is the greatest love story ever told.

God's test of Abraham in our first reading was a critical step in all this. God's fourth covenant to Man through Abraham actually had several parts to it. The first part was God's call to him – whose name was Abram at the time to *“Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land I will show you.”*

Abram was 75 years old at the time and his childless wife Sarai were living in Haran, which is in present day Assyria. His father, Terah, moved from place to place – a nomad – and was last staying in the vicinity of Ur which was located in present day Iraq when he set out for the land of Canaan along the Mediterranean Sea, but ended up in Haran.

When God told Abram to move from Haran, it was to the land of Canaan. God promised him numerous descendants who would become a great nation, plus many other blessings. When Abram accepted God's offer and moved to Canaan, God promised to give him the land of Canaan.

But Abram and Sarai were still childless, and they were not getting any younger. So, Abram figured that his descendants would actually be those of his chief steward named Eliezer, to whom he would leave his possessions if he and Sarai remained childless. But God assured him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and would be his own “issue”, that is, from him and Sarai. This part of God's covenant offer to Abram was formalized with an ancient ceremony whereby certain animals were cut in half and, after dark, God's presence in the form of a flaming pot or fiery torch passed between them.

Soon after that, however, Sarai suggested to Abram that the only way he was going to have offspring was if he had relations with her young maidservant named Hagar. So, he did, and Hagar bore him a son, named Ishmael though whom Abram would have many non-Jewish descendants, mostly the Muslims of today.

Although Abram had faltered in this matter, God meant what had told him, and, when Abram was 99 years old, God renewed that pledge. On this occasion, God also changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah, AND required circumcision of Abraham and all of his male descendants as a sign and a part of His promise to make them “exceedingly fertile”.

Then, on His visitation to Sodom and Gomorrah, God appeared to Abraham and Sarah in the form of three men – strangers -- representing the Holy Trinity we may suppose. Abraham and Sarah showed them extraordinary hospitality and God told Abraham that by the same time next year, he and Sarah would have a son. That would be Isaac – their one and only son – through whom a nation of descendants

promised to Abraham was to come. And so it happened, when Abraham was 100 years old, Isaac was born.

This brings us to today's first reading when God put Abraham to the supreme test by asking him to sacrifice his dearly beloved, one and only Son, Isaac. Isaac was grown up enough by this time to be referred to as a "boy" – someone no older than 12 years of age but old enough to carry the wood for the holocaust to Mt. Moriah – several miles away which may have been the eventual site of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem or somewhere north of there in the land of Moriah.

In his homily for today Bishop Robert Barron does a superb job of helping his listeners understand the dramatic crisis this was for Abraham who was being asked by God to put his son to death and offer him up as a burnt sacrifice on the stone altar he was to make. Not only was Isaac Abraham's only son with his wife, Sarah -- and loved by Abraham as much as any father could humanly his child -- but Isaac was the only son through whom God's promise of numerous descendants could possibly be fulfilled.

Abraham must have been profoundly anguished and totally perplexed – bewildered -- and yet he made ready to carry out God's command without any appeal or delay. Not even a tender question by Isaac about where the sheep for the holocaust was swayed his father who told him that God Himself would provide the sheep. That Isaac remained silent and let his father bind him in preparation for the holocaust must have been poignant beyond words to Abraham. Trusting in his father, Isaac was a willing victim.

We might suppose that tears were streaming down Abraham's face, but still, he was steadfast in carrying out God's will, reaching out to take the knife and about to slay Isaac when the Lord's messenger – an angel – stayed his hand. "*Abraham, Abraham*", the angel said, "*Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God since you did not without from me your own son.*" God's messenger then goes on to re-affirm God's promises to Abraham. By his obedience to God's will in this supreme test, Abraham sealed the deal – the covenant offer -- with God, so to speak.

Bishop Barron sees Abraham's response to this test by God as an indication – a sure sign – of his love for God Himself more than for the benefits God could provide. Would that all people loved God and all others that way! Would that spouses, especially, loved each other that way. Then, they would all live out their marriage vows – their marriage covenants with each other -- for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.

And remember -- to obey God's will is to LOVE God. We love people by seeking their true good. But God is perfectly good – all good -- the summation of that which is good in Himself – so the only way we can love God is to do His will which is for our good and the good of others. Emotions can incline us to toward this, or impede it, but the essence of love for God is obedience to His will in praise and thanksgiving, at all times, in all circumstance unto the Cross and Resurrection in oneness with the Son of God, in response to God's love for us, which as we hear in today's second reading, is so great that He did not spare His only beloved Son, but offered Him unto the Cross for us.

This brings us to today's Gospel event – the Transfiguration of Jesus – a revelation of His divine glory to Peter, James, and John in the presence also of Moses and Elijah. We can connect this to the test of Abraham in our first reading if we keep in mind that the Apostles are not there yet in loving Jesus Himself more than for what He can give them as the promised Messiah King. They would not have that kind of love until they received the Holy Spirit and were able to love Jesus unto the Cross, which they all did.

But Jesus wished to give them a glimpse of what oneness with Him unto the Cross would mean beyond the Cross in order to help them know Him more completely and to get a perfect love for Him that would far surpass their love for the promised benefits of loving Him.

Brothers and sisters, this brings us to the place WE need to be now in order to get to where we want to be forever, i.e., WITH JESUS and with one another IN HIM in the Father's House, namely Heaven – in the new heavens and the new earth. The Eucharist is the WAY there. It is the New and Everlasting Covenant – God's full and final offer to Man – to US – of oneness with Himself in Jesus FOREVER, but only if we accept His offer wholeheartedly. Only if we accept His offer like Mary did – deliberately, freely, totally, formally as with a marriage consent to a nuptial proposal, and then reciprocally lived out unto the Cross of obedience and love with Jesus which gives way to the Resurrection with Him in eternal praise and thanksgiving to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

WOW! I hope you will join me in properly receiving Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament today and at every Mass and in saying these words silently and sincerely when you do – and then striving to live them out in-between – come what may – for better or worse -- with fervent prayer, and acts of penance or self-denial, and plentiful works of mercy for the life of the world, for the true temporal and most especially the eternal good of all whom Jesus came to save – all the willing – for their sanctification and salvation. I AM ALL YOURS O MOST LOVING JESUS THROUGH MARY YOUR MOTHER WITH THE HELP OF ST. JOSEPH.