

# Trinity 3(A) - Sacrifice and Intention

When I was young, and we were living over here in England, I was absolutely fascinated with knights and castles. I couldn't get enough of stories about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table or the Crusaders fighting Saladin in the desert. To this day, one of the things at the top of my bucket list is to try on a suit of armour. And this fascination was only encouraged by the fact that we lived in the land of King Arthur and were surrounded by the remains of the Middle Ages. Plus, my dad is an historian, and our family holidays almost always involved visiting one of these places and listening to my dad weave stories from the myths and legends attached to each place. I remember in particular visiting Windsor Castle when I was about 8 or 9 and meeting a real live knight in armour on an armoured horse. He was demonstrating to the crowd how heavy and clumsy knights were, but all I saw was shiny plate and colourful tunic, and I dearly wished I could be that knight.

And then on one trip we went to France, and during a visit to Rouen my dad told us about Joan of Arc. At that point, I knew two things: one was that knights didn't exist anymore, and the other was that, even if they did, girls couldn't be knights. And yet, here's a story of a young girl who not only became a knight, but led a whole army into battle. I was completely hooked. This girl was my hero! And then we went to the square where she was executed and I learned what it meant to be burned at the stake. Because Joan of Arc wasn't just a knight, she was also a martyr. And I think that was the first time I really started to comprehend the nature of sacrifice. She knew who she was meant to be, who she believed God was calling her to be, and she knew that if she followed that calling and were found out, she would be in deep trouble with the authorities. It must have been a tough decision for a teenage girl. I'm not sure I could have made the same decision at her age...in fact, I know I probably wouldn't have, because I think of the times I hid my true self as a teenager just to avoid a bit of ridicule by my peers. In high school, being laughed at can sometimes be worse than burning at the stake.

And we're faced with this same kind of reflection on sacrifice when we hear what our own Joan just read so well from Genesis. Like Joan of Arc, Abraham is asked by God to do something difficult, something which will result in terrible consequences, and he must decide to do what God asks and suffer the consequences, or turn his back on God and walk away. To a lot of people, this doesn't seem like a fair choice...after all, who wants to serve a God who would ask you to sacrifice your only child? But Abraham could only guess at the outcome. Yes, there seemed only one possible way this could

turn out, but by this time for whatever reason Abraham had developed a trust in God that was stronger than his dread of what he thought would happen. So he decided not to try to predict the future, but to just do what God asked and leave the results in God's hands. And, of course, we hear with considerable relief that God didn't really let Abraham go through with it, and the actual result of his obedience was greater than his wildest dreams.

But then I think to myself, yes, OK, that's all well and good, but I'm not Abraham...God can't really expect me to have such faith that I'm able to face such a terrible decision. There are those truly exceptional people that stand out in history, the martyrs (and, yes, they're almost always martyrs) like Joan of Arc and Maximilian Kolbe and Dr Martin Luther King. These people are remembered mainly for exceptional bravery...for answering a calling that they *knew* would almost certainly have fatal consequences. And that's a kind of bravery that most of us mere mortals feel is way beyond our capability. But let's not forget one thing: those are the exceptions, not the average. Don't get me wrong, being a Christian is not for the faint-hearted, but we are not all called to be literal martyrs...if we were, there would be no one left to do God's work! We are sometimes asked to make other sacrifices, and sometimes these are pretty big sacrifices, but it's rarely on the scale of giving up our lives, and that means it can sometimes be easy to miss the significance when we do choose to do what God is asking us to do rather than what we really want.

But it is significant, and we know that because of our Gospel reading. Jesus doesn't list grand acts like martyrdom as the ones that will be rewarded, he lists simple acts of welcome and hospitality *done with intention* as the gold standard. And the intention is very important. We've all seen acts of philanthropy done with the wrong intention. We've seen the celebrity making a big show of an act of charity simply to be *seen* to be doing such a thing. Human beings are surprisingly good at spotting sincerity, and we can usually pick up on something being done for show rather than out of genuine love. So the key here is that what we do is out of our love for God and our intention to do God's will. And we all, every single one of us, have faced those moments of decision. It might be late in the evening when you come home from a long day and find a sink full of dishes that you think really should have been washed up by the person who was home all day. But rather than go and pick a fight with that person, you run the water and wash up the dishes. Or the moment you're at work and dealing with someone who needs your help but treats you with disdain and rudeness. But rather than treat this person with equally cold politeness and doing the bare minimum to help them, you give them your best and treat them as well as you would a friend.

So the scale of the action doesn't matter so much to God as the intention behind it. Small, unnoticed choices made out of love can sometimes take just as much determination and bravery as putting our lives on the line. Sometimes only God knows how hard it is for us to wrestle with our own desires and then set them aside to do what we know is God's will instead. But that's just the point: God *does* know, and God does notice. And it's especially at those times that other people have no idea of the personal sacrifice we are making that we can be assured that God has noticed. But this can be a bit tricky, because as soon as we start to notice our own actions and realise that we're doing something truly good out of love for God, we are then immediately in danger of continuing to act that way out of a sense of pride or in some way imagining ourselves as better than others. That's when the intention changes, and we're no longer acting mainly out of love for God.

So, part of being intentional is constantly choosing God over ourselves. This is why Morning and Evening or Night Prayer have continued to be so important in our Anglican heritage, because when we wake up every morning and start our day by focusing on God, we are intentionally setting out to do what God wants us to do that day. Even if we don't particularly feel like it, even if the best we can do some mornings is a grumpy muttering of the Lord's Prayer, that simple act of setting aside even just a little time for prayer is demonstrating to God that we are trying as best we can. Because Jesus said even a cup of cold water offered out of love for him is recognised by God. We can all do that...we can all do just that much...and before we know it, we'll find ourselves wanting to give more and wanting to do more. But for now, just one little act is enough. We're not all going to wake up in the morning and put on a suit of armour and ride into battle, but we can all wake up in the morning and say to God, Here I am, I need your help, but I'm ready to do your work today. Amen.