

RE-GIFTED

Today's feast of the Presentation of the Lord commemorates the day when Mary and Joseph, following tradition, took their 40-day old son Jesus to the temple and offered him back to God. For, as written in Mosaic law; "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord, and to offer the sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Understanding this profound concept of ritual sacrifice is crucial for entire church, and even moreso for we Armenians Orthodox; whose very Sunday mass is called *Badarak*, literally, "The Sacrifice."

So to get back to the root of what sacrifice means in the Holy Scriptures, we must go all the way back to Abraham and that terrible day when he was asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Many find this story hard to identify with, but like all biblical stories, they offer profound truths if we just read them right. Let's remember the elements of the story. Abraham grew old and was not blessed with a son to continue his family line. So imagine Abraham's joy when Sarah conceived Isaac when he was 100 years old. I wasn't quite that old when my son was born; but close enough to identify with Abraham's joy! Isaac was described as Abraham's "only one" and his "precious one;" so what comes next is unthinkable. God invites Abraham to take Isaac and offer him in sacrifice. Abraham astonishingly agrees to the request. When they arrive at the place of sacrifice, Abraham binds Isaac, and raises his knife. Suddenly God intervenes, stops the sacrifice, and gives Abraham a ram to offer in place of his son.

Reading on the surface, this seems to be a terrible story, hearkening back to the barbaric days of human sacrifice. But in the context of God's relationship to mankind, it is a story with a profound life lesson about the gift of love and all gifts; namely, that in order for something to be received as a gift, it must be received twice. Let me explain. A gift, by definition, is something that is not deserved but freely given. What is our first impulse when we are given a great gift? We instinctually respond; "I can't take this! I don't deserve this!" In essence, that gesture, that healthy instinctual response, is an attempt to give the gift back to its giver. But, of course, the giver refuses to take the gift back and offers it to us again with reassurance: "But I want you to have this!" When we receive it the second time, it is now more properly ours, because by offering it back, we admit in thought and deed that the gift was unmerited and undeserved.

This is the same dynamic in our story. Isaac comes to Abraham as the greatest, most-undeserved, gift of his life. He surely questioned whether he deserved this and whether this gift actually belonged to him. So when God asks for his gift back, Abraham complies. Well perhaps "I never deserved this after all!" But just then, the giver of all gifts-Love Himself-stops Abraham's gesture and gives the gift a second time. Now Abraham can receive Isaac, without guilt, as pure gift. And as they walk back home, Isaac is now Abraham's son in a way that he never was before. Abraham had to receive the gift of life twice before understanding its true value and grace.

This dynamic runs through the scriptures and through our lives. Not coincidentally, it is the same dynamic which underlies today's feast day, The Presentation of Jesus to the temple. Mary and Joseph were given the gift of Jesus, and observing Biblical law, offer him back to God in His temple. They are speechless when an old man named Simeon tells these new parents that their baby Jesus will become the long awaited savior of mankind, but only through great suffering and sacrifice. Only after mankind, in all our depravity, would sacrifice Jesus back to heaven by the cross.

But the story does not end here, for in his great love for mankind, Jesus willing goes to his Father, and is given back to the world in an even deeper way. For Jesus walked with the Apostles in his time, but now he dwells within us. He dwells in the body of his billions of believers as the church. His real presence animates our sacraments, his living breath our Holy Scriptures. He abides in the world by the Holy Spirit, counseling and healing all who believe in His name.

Like Abraham with Isaac, we Christians have benefited from receiving the gift of the Son of God twice, the first his marvelous life on earth and the second his life eternal—by which he guides—protects and counsels those who follow him. We Armenian Christians, whose weekly service is called "the sacrifice," must always remember the essence of sacrifice and its implications for all of life: That to properly receive anything, including life itself, requires that we recognize it precisely as gift, as something undeserved. And to do that requires sacrifice, a daily willingness to offer our lives back again to God and for others. This echoes Abraham's great sacrifice. This honors God the Father's great sacrifice. This was, is, and will be Jesus' great sacrifice, the *Badarak*...our weekly ritual reminding us that our lives are gifts; and as we learn to offer them back to God and each other, God blesses and returns them again and again in ever deeper ways, now and always, amen.