

We have just returned from sunny Bangalore! Narola and I enjoyed catching up with old friends especially a friend from school, Richard and his wife Maggie, who travelled 13 hours by overnight train to spend two days with us! A very precious time. Most of our time, however, was taken up looking into Mum's affairs (!), That did not come out right. What I meant to say was we spent time looking into the matters of life with which she struggles!

I conveyed your individual greetings to Mum; she remembers everyone and asked to convey her love and warm greetings to each of you. She says, she **may not** be able to meet you again here, but she is confident she will see you in heaven! I asked her to pray for me, that I might learn to share in her optimism!

In two days we celebrate one of God's gifts to our economy. Think of it, Valentine's Day provides a boost to florists and the horticulture industry, chocolatiers and confectioners, the greetings card industry (when we are at a loss for words, Hallmark says it better!), the catering industry which includes, restaurants, pubs and other eateries, the hospitality industry of hotels and B&Bs, and not forgetting the armies of service staff (waiters, Maitre d's) who receive bigger tips at this time, mostly from men who wish **them** to shower attention and kindness on their significant other, to the extent they have fallen short of doing the same in the preceding 12 months! Then there are couriers and delivery people earn more overtime while consuming more petrol and diesel. There must be more, not forgetting the Exchequer to the government, which collects a commensurate increase in VAT!

Generally, what we call a happy time, but Valentine's Day is not always a happy occasion for everyone. Some struggle with unhappy memories, others struggle with the loss of someone with whom they shared many happy years, perhaps no longer with them in body, or perhaps no longer in mind, now living with disease or disability.

There is one love story which has fascinated me over the years. One of my favourite authors has used this love story to explore God's vision for marriage and singleness. The book? ***I Isaac, take Thee Rebecca...*** by Ravi Zacharias.

Remember Abraham and Sarah who had Isaac, the child of God's promise when he was 100 years old? When we think of Abraham, we can only remember God "testing" him. Of course we know that God does not test anyone, but this is the pinnacle of Abraham's life when God says to him, "*take your son, your only son, yes Isaac your son, whom you dearly love (God does rub it in!), to the land of*

Moriah and there offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountain tops I will show you.

Reading this with our own frame-of-mind and understanding, we develop a view of God, as One who gives with one hand and takes with the other. Some go further to label God an ogre (or similar) who takes pleasure in demanding us to perform rites and rituals.

First, let's set the record straight. Most paintings I have seen on the theme, "The Sacrifice of Isaac", including Helen's favourite, Caravaggio, miss something significant.

The first thing we must remember is that God will not participate in death; in the culture of Abraham's days, when human sacrifice was prevalent, why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son?

When Abraham raised his hand to "perform" the human sacrifice, here is what the record says, *The Angel of the Lord called Abraham from heaven* (note: God does not participate in death and an angel has to watch and speak on His behalf), *Abraham, Abraham! Here I am, he answered. The Angel said, Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; **for now I know that (in your heart and soul) you fear and revere God, since you have not held back from me, nor begrudged giving me your son, your only son.***

It was not God's intention that Abraham perform a **physical** human sacrifice; God wanted to know **who** was foremost in Abraham's heart: the gift of his son ISAAC, or the Giver of the gift.

This is where our love story begins. Abraham believed God's promise, *I will make you into a great nation*, and trusted Him to enable this. Having spent many decades misunderstanding God's plan and purpose, and acting at cross purposes to God, Abraham had reached a stage in his relationship with God, to place His complete trust in God's promise.

The word **promise** is an important word in what happens next in this love story. After Sarah's death, Abraham called his trusted manager of his household and asked him to **promise** three things:

1. Promise me, if I die before Isaac is married, you will make every effort to ensure Isaac does not marry one of the local lasses.

2. Promise me, if I die before Isaac is married, you will go back to my homeland and bring back a girl worthy of Isaac.
3. If for any reason, you cannot find a girl, or she will not come with you, promise me, you will **NOT** take Isaac back from where I came

Abraham wanted his trusted manager to understand, **because God promised me safe passage and permanent residence in this land, and promised my descendants would live here for His glory, make sure your actions don't defy or thwart God's plan and His promise.**

It is important to appreciate these promises, which are crucial to our understanding of this love story.

The story is long and full of interesting detail, but we need to focus on the importance of **promise**. So when the trusted manager arrives in Abraham's home town, feeling inadequate for the task ahead and worried, he prays, *Lord, God of my master Abraham, please let me succeed today and show Your grace to my master, Abraham.* In other words, *Let my actions be in line with Your promise to my master, Abraham.*

The first thing we learn about this word **promise** is that, more often than not, we cannot live up to what we promise, without God's help. If we have made a promise, which at times we feel is difficult to keep, for whatever reason, we can appeal to the One who always keeps His promise. Our appeal can be very specific, but must always honour God's plans and His promise.

So, Abraham's trusted manager continues His prayer, *Lord, here I am beside this well and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. **May it be, when I ask a young woman, "Please may I have a drink of water from the cistern you have just filled", I would know she would be your choice of wife for Isaac if she replies, "Of course you may! Please help yourself while I draw water for your camels too".***

This is not the way **WE** get married and it might seem alien to us, but there is a big world out there, with many different social customs. There are societies where arrangements for marriage are made with fervent prayer, seeking God's choice in the matter of a life-partner.

Don't get me wrong! Just because people pray for God's direction in finding a soul-mate for life, that they live happily ever after! There are many who prayed and thought the soul-mate with whom they fell in love, was the one God intended

for them, only to find themselves facing challenges they thought would not happen to them, ***because they had prayed and believed God's bringing them together.***

Many pray for the right partner, which is the right thing to do, but forget to pray the second half of the prayer which is, for the right union which makes them One, as God the Father and Jesus His Son are One.

I enjoy this love story because the power of **promise** is life changing. When Abraham realised God knew what He was doing and kept His promise, his life changed. Abraham did not second guess God, for tired to do His work for Him. Although Abraham did not see the millions of people God promised who would fill the ends of the earth and bless it, he did see the one child through whom God would fulfil His promise.

The Pulitzer Prize winning author and playwright Thornton Wilder, said to his wife, *"I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was **the promise** that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them. It was that promise."*¹

It is the power of the promise which makes a love story. The story of Isaac and Rebecca was founded on the **PROMISE** God made to Abraham. God keeps His promise. He promised, *I will never leave you nor forsake you*, and he hasn't.

He promised to *enable you to share His divine nature and escape the world's human corruption*, and He does. He promised those who trust Him, *They will soar high on wings like eagles do. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint*² and they do.

In the garden at Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for His disciples (which includes all of us who follow Jesus), *Father, may they be one, just as you and I are One*. But the promise does not end there. *That they may have the full measure of my joy within them!*

So, whether you plan to dine out, or dine in for two for £10, may this joy be your blessing this Valentine's Day, whether you are still a couple, or you reminisce fondly of the days when your loved one was still with you in person, and perhaps

¹ Thornton Wilder, "The Skin of Our Teeth", quoted by William Doherty in Take Back Your Marriage, p7

² Isaiah 40: 29-31

in mind, and if Valentine's Day does not hold happy memories, may you discover this joy and allow it to bless you as God intends, to help you forget the painful past and live a forgiven future.

This joy is God's promise to all, to have and to enjoy, because God keeps His promises.

AMEN.