

## **Opening Homily at the Fourth OCDS Congress** **by Fr. Dominic Borg, OCD**

The First word that came to us this evening is from the Book of the Letter of Paul to the Romans. It is a Word about the importance of faith in our lives. Scripture tells us that "faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God". This is the Word, brothers and sisters that we read about in the Gospel of St. John; "A time is coming, and now is when the dead will hear the voice of God, and those who hear it will live." When this Word of God found Abraham, he was as good as death itself. He was seventy-five years old, married to this beautiful woman Sarah, and yet he did not have any children. In the time of Abraham not to have children meant not to have a future. You did not have property unless you had children to defend it. And so, the Word of God found Abraham in the same state that perhaps you and I are in this evening, thinking about what he is going to do with his life. The same word that went to Haggai and Haggai, the prophet, presented in front of the people and told them, "Consider how you have fared, think how you have fared." This Word went to Abraham, and it found that Abraham was a person lacking joy. He was lacking in joy because he was a person who did not yet know God. The Word called Abraham the way the Word called Adam, and the way also the Word is calling you and me this evening.

The first Word that we encounter in the Scriptures from the Book of Genesis tells us that God is in search of man, Adam, Adam Ihecha ... Adam, Adam, where do you stand? The word Ihecha in Hebrew does not mean exactly where are you, but Ihecha in Hebrew means where do you stand? Where do you stand in your relationship with Me? Where do you stand in your relationship with your wife? Where do you stand in your relationship also with creation itself? Many times we look around us and we are unable to see what the psalmists see. The psalmist is looking up and he says "O God, what is man that you think about him. When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what is man? He is so small compared to these majestic works." And we look around brothers and sisters, and we remain indifferent. Faith is seeing the will of God unfolding in mysterious ways. A man, 75 years old, has a lot of money, and yet, he does not have life, he does not have a child. God said to him "Abraham, I will make you happy. I will give you the child that you have been expecting. Start to follow me", and God did not tell Abraham where he was going. The same it is with you and me, we started this journey of spiritual life, we did not know exactly where we were heading. We had a little notion, and there were times in our journey when we said "If only I knew, that as soon as I was going to come to this Congress they were going to send me home with empty pockets, I would have hesitated" ... and another person said "If only I knew, I would have brought more money with me." There are many lessons brothers and sisters that Abraham can teach you and me. The first lesson that we encounter in the life of Abraham is in chapter 12 of the book of Genesis. "And Abraham listened to that direction", the direction that the Word was giving him. He learned straight away how to be flexible to the direction of the Word of God in his life. He is carrying a Word, a Word in his heart that has so great a power that it can eradicate him from his family, eradicate him from his security, and set him on a journey. The first lesson is "And Abraham traveled toward the Negev by stages." This is spiritual life brothers and sisters. Spiritual life is not made out of high jumps - no. You have to learn how to travel by stages, to learn how to wait upon God and listen constantly to His direction the way the young Samuel, under the direction of Eli was taught how to say to God "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Now, do not forget that listening is love in action. We all remember when we were young and we blew it. Our parents disciplined us, and we began to cry. Then we tried to fix the problem by saying "But mom, I love you, I love you." "Yes, you love me, but you do not listen to me." Listening is the first duty of love. Jesus Christ said to us "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." The Word gave Abraham this power, to learn how to listen, and how to answer to the Word of God. Whether it was God who spoke to him, whether it was his son who spoke to him, or whether it was an angel, the reaction of Abraham was the same "Abraham, Abraham", and Abraham answered "Hineini" "Here I am." They were going up Mount Moriah, so that Isaac would be sacrificed there, and Isaac said to his father "Father", and the father answered "Hineini"... "Here I am my son." When Abraham was up on the mountain, on Mount Moraih, the Angel of the Lord came to him "Abraham, Abraham", and by this time, brothers and sisters, Abraham has become the object, or should I say the subject of our jealousy. What is the subject of our jealousy? It is to learn to be synchronized with the Word of God. Imagine Abraham, with the knife in his hand coming down with speed and with power. He is going to stick this dagger into the body of his son, and he has to do it fast so that the knife will enter into the body. We speak about how fast your computer is, forget it brothers and sisters. We all know how fast your computer is - only for

the first hour after you buy it, and then quickly it goes slow. Not so with those who learn how to be flexible to the Word of God. With a knife in his hand, he is coming down with speed and he heard the words "Abraham, Abraham" and he stopped "Hineini" "here I am". A beautiful lesson. A very powerful lesson, that when we are synchronized with the Word of God, we do not only save the lives of the people around us, but we also save our own life.

You remember when we were young, we were busy doing something, or we were playing, and our parents called us, we pretended that we did not hear them, because we wanted to finish what we were doing. And after the second and third time, when we were finished what we were doing we would say "Did you call me"? "Yes, I did." "Oh, what do you want?" Imagine if Abraham had done the same thing. With a knife in his hand, hearing "Abraham, Abraham", he had just continued on and then, with the dagger stuck in the body of his son he had said to the angel "Here I am, what do you want?" "What do I want? I want to tell you Abraham, not to kill your son." "What? What?" He would have taken the dagger from the body of his son and would have put it into himself, he would have killed himself.

But Abraham was so synchronized to that Word that he stopped half-way through "Hineini" " Here I am." "What do you want? Here I am." Whether it is God who is speaking to him, whether it is his son, or whether it is an Angel, his answer is the same. We, on the other hand, react differently. If it is my boss, or if it is my Provincial we quickly reply - "yes, yes Fr. Provincial Yes" If it is another person "Leave me alone, for heaven's sake. Stop running behind me as my shadow. Give me a break." If it is your son calling you, you say "Leave me quiet." Abraham teaches us this lesson. To learn to be of service to other people. You have all heard the saying that there are two kinds of people in the world. Those who say "Ah, there you are." And those who say "Here I am.". Those who say here I am are ready to give service. Those who say "Ah, there you are. I have been looking for you." They want something from you.

They said to Jesus Christ "Master, Master we have been looking for you." "You searched for me because you have had your fill of the bread, that is why you searched for me." Abraham teaches us how to learn the meaning of this expression and put it into action.

There is another beautiful lesson that this man teaches you and me. He teaches us a very important lesson, that whenever God approaches you and me, he always approaches us to give us more than what we already have. That was the experience of Abraham. He did have this child, after waiting 25 years. It is not a joke. You hear this member, and the other member saying "I have been in the community 6, 7, 8 years. I do not know where we are heading." You know "The dark night". I am waiting for this Isaac that God promised me in the beginning of this journey. I am waiting for this Isaac. I have been in the community - 2 years of preparation, 3 years until the first promise, and then the definite promise, and now they even allow me to make the vows, but this Isaac, I do not know. God appeared to Abraham after 24 years. Abraham, he said, "Do not be afraid" "Look here God, before you go, look here, 24 years ago you promised me that I was going to have a child. Where is this child?" Abraham had still to know this God. He was attached more to the promises of God than to God Himself. "Do not be afraid Abraham, I am your shield." To have the giver is to have the gift.

This is like that Rabbi, who went abroad, and before he left he wrote a Will. He had only one child and a slave. His child was also abroad. He had to hand over the Will to his slave, and in the Will he wrote very clearly. "Everything that I have belongs to my slave, except the one thing that my son will choose." It happened that the Rabbi died. The slave opened the Will "I am the one who will inherit everything. I am the heir of this big property." So he sent a message to the son of the Rabbi. "Come, because your father has died." As soon as the son came, the slave opened the Will in front of the son, and said "Here, read the Will" "All that I have belongs to the slave, except the one thing that my son chooses." And the son looked at the slave and said "I choose you. I take you and all your inheritance." How many times brothers and sisters, you and I, do we seek more the consolations of God rather than the God of consolations? How is it that we are still enslaved with fear? How is it? Because we do not know what the future holds? Who cares what the future holds for you and for me. The important thing is that we know the one who holds our future. That is the difference. "Do not be afraid Abraham, I am your shield." And so when God approached him and told him to sacrifice his son Isaac, it was not a big deal for Abraham. His experience of God was that every time that God approached him, he never took anything from him, but He always gave him more!

Whatever God takes from you this weekend, it is to give you eternity. When God takes time from you, it is to change your time into eternity. God is not taking anything from us brothers and sisters, He is love, and love, out of its very nature is always concerned to give. And so when God said to Abraham, the way God says to you and to me, that if we want to enter into a genuine prayer ... St. Teresa tells us that there is the necessity of humility ... the necessity of detachment ... and the necessity of love for our neighbour. So when God said to him "Abraham, sacrifice your son" , Abraham listened. Now it is very important to remember that Isaac was 35 years old, he was not a young child. In the Jewish tradition Isaac was not a small child. He was 35 years old, and that is why the Christians, in the time of Jesus Christ, were making comparisons between Isaac and Jesus Christ. After the time of Jesus Christ, in the Jewish tradition, we find that Isaac was 37 years old because the Jews did not want, and they were not happy that the Christians were comparing Isaac with Jesus Christ, and so they changed his age ... from then on, we find in the Jewish tradition that he was 37 years old and not 35 as before the time of Jesus Christ. And Abraham was going up the mountain, like Mary our Mother - going up the mountain. We have in front of us the statue of Our Lady of the Smiles, thanks to the Secular Order ... it was donated to the Friars in our Church at St. Andrews a couple of years ago. It came directly from Lisieux.

Abraham and Isaac were going up the mountain and Isaac said to him "Father here is the fire, here is the wood, but where is the victim for the sacrifice?" Listen to this father of faith "My son" he answered "God himself will provide the lamb", not the victim, or the animal for the sacrifice, but "the lamb". Today, God is providing for you and for me the lamb. That is why St. Cyril of Jerusalem in the year 340, was encouraging Christians to receive communion in their hands, crossed in the form of a Cross, and the form of a throne. This is the cross that is killing me ... but Jesus Christ is going to die on this cross for me, and I am going to come out victorious, glorious from that situation. That is why St. Cyril tells the people to receive communion, and their fingers have to be tight to each other ... he says "If you were to be pouring gold into the palms of your hands, would you not tie your fingers together so that you would not lose any of the gold dust?" What is being poured into your hand is much more precious than gold purified with fire ... much more precious.

And they continue the journey, Abraham and his son Isaac. They arrive on Mt. Moriah. There is a beautiful tradition there brothers and sisters. This tradition in the Jewish culture is so rich that one Rabbi has counted one hundred thousand (100,000) commentaries on this event - Abraham sacrificing his son. One hundred thousand commentaries. It is called the "Akedah". Akedah means tying, binding - where Isaac turns to his father and he says "Father, tie me well to this tree because it may be that when I see the knife coming upon me I will move and you cannot sacrifice me." Because, in the Jewish tradition, if the animal, the victim, moves under the blow of the knife, it's rebellious, and you cannot offer something to God that is rebellious. The priest has to put aside that victim and cannot sacrifice that victim. And so Isaac said to his Father, "Father, tie me well to this tree so that when I see the knife coming, I will not be able to move." That rope is the cross. It is the cross that God gives us in our life that ties us well with the will of God, the way that Isaac wants it to be.

As you can see, there are many, many lessons behind this word that the Church this evening is bringing in front of you and me ... this man Abraham. Many are the Midrash that go around this figure, the figure of Abraham.

I conclude with a very beautiful Midrash when the time has come for Abraham to die. He was sitting at the entrance of his tent, the Midrash tells us, and he saw this man approaching him. Because Abraham was a man of God, he had the gift of insight. He could look at you, and he could read you like a book, inside out. He looked at this man coming toward him, and he could see that that man was the angel of death in disguise. Abraham stood up, approached this man, the angel of death, and told him "I know that you have to fulfil your mission, but before you do so, allow me to ask you a question." Now we have to remember that for the Jewish people, they never answer a question with an answer, they always answer a question with a another question. So Abraham said to the Angel of death, because this Angel was coming to take Abraham away, "Have you ever seen a friend who wants the death of his friend?" , because Abraham was called the friend of God. The Angel of death answered him "Have you ever seen a friend who does not want his friend to be with him?" Here we come to the word of Socrates where he said "Who knows whether in the long run what we call and look at as a curse might be the mother of all blessings."