

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise; for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God. By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age--and Sarah herself was sterile--for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy. So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore. – Hebrews 11:8-12

- ✠ Abraham is our model for true vocation, for all true vocation involves renunciation. At Baptism we take on our vocation as Christians, first renouncing Satan even before we affirm our faith in God. In the vocation of marriage we renounce others for the sake of our spouse. But, as with Abraham, true vocation is both a FROM and a TO; and Abraham was called not only to leave paganism behind but to follow wherever God led him. This response to God's call is a living out of obedience. It is what the Letter to the Hebrews calls "faith."
- ✠ Abraham's call was not individualistic. Abraham was called to be a father and a model to others, so that a community could be created within the human family. In the same way, every true vocation is for the up-building of community and not just for the sake of the person who is called.
- ✠ Melchizedek, king of Salem (Jerusalem), appears in Genesis 14. Both a king and priest, he blesses Abraham with a gift of bread and wine. He comes across as Abraham's spiritual follower, introduced to us even before the birth of Abraham's first physical descendant. Melchizedek's priesthood is also introduced before the Levitical priesthood, and represents an order of priesthood different from the hereditary nature of the Levitical priesthood. It is a charismatic priesthood, bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi and so offered His sacrifice on the Cross not by virtue of the Levitical priesthood, but through the priesthood of Melchizedek. The night before He died, Jesus offered the gift of Himself in the form of bread and wine. In this way Melchizedek's gift to Abraham is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, and Melchizedek a type of Christ (see Hebrews 7).
- ✠ The first covenant with Abraham is very different from the covenants made between people in ancient times. In this covenant, virtually all the obligations belong to God. Abraham need only be himself and remain faithful to God. St. Paul seems to agree when in Romans he says that we are saved by faith and not by fulfilling great works. He uses Abraham's covenant by drawing the distinction between Abraham's faith and his covenant of circumcision – between the first phase of his covenant, which was of pure faith, and the second phase which involved circumcision (see Romans 4:1-3,10-12). St. Paul doesn't suggest that faith and works are incompatible, but he contrasts faithless works to a faith in pure form, which may or may not include specific works. When St. James says, "show me your faith without works, and I will

Thoughts on Abraham † 2

show you the faith behind my works,” he isn’t contradicting Paul, but clarifying him. Paul didn’t condemn circumcision as a faithless act, but sought to identify the faith behind circumcision as more important than the circumcision itself.

Abraham took wood for the burnt offering and placed it upon Isaac his son, and he took fire and a sword in his hands, and together they went off. Isaac himself carries the wood for his own holocaust: this is a figure of Christ. He bore the burden of the cross, and yet to carry the wood for the holocaust is really the duty of the priest. He is then both victim and priest. This is the meaning of the expression: together they went off. When Abraham, who was to perform the sacrifice, carried the fire and the knife, Isaac did not walk behind him, but with him. In this way he showed that he exercised the priesthood equally with Abraham. What happens after this? Isaac said to Abraham his father: Father. This plea from the son was at that instant the voice of temptation. For do you not think the voice of the son who was about to be sacrificed struck a responsive chord in the heart of the father? Although Abraham did not waver because of his faith, he responded with a voice full of affection and asked: What is it, my son? Isaac answered him: Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust? And Abraham replied: God will provide for himself a sheep for the holocaust, my son. The careful yet loving response of Abraham moves me greatly. I do not know what he saw in spirit, because he did not speak of the present but of the future: God will provide for himself a sheep. His reply concerns the future, yet his son inquires about the present. Indeed the Lord himself provided a sheep for himself in Christ. Abraham extended his hand to take the sword and slay his son, and the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said: Abraham, Abraham. And he responded: Here I am. And the angel said: Do not put your hand upon the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God. Compare these words to those of the Apostle when he speaks of God: He did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. God emulates man with magnificent generosity. Abraham offered to God his mortal son who did not die, and God gave up his immortal Son who died for all of us. And Abraham, looking about him, saw a ram caught by the horns in a bush. We said before that Isaac is a type of Christ. Yet this also seems true of the ram. To understand how both are figures of Christ—Isaac who was not slain and the ram who was—is well worth our inquiry. Christ is the Word of God, but the Word became flesh. Christ therefore suffered and died, but in the flesh. In this respect, the ram is the type, just as John said: Behold the lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. The Word, however, remained incorruptible. This is Christ according to the spirit, and Isaac is the type. Therefore, Christ himself is both victim and priest according to the spirit. For he offers the victim to the Father according to the flesh, and he is himself offered on the altar of the cross. – Origen, Homily on Genesis, 8, 6-9