

Abraham and Mary—Models of Faith in the Day to Day



The Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic and religious author, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a complex and often troubled man. While from a modest social background, his father, Michael Pedersen, through his impressive entrepreneurial skills amassed the fortune that would eventually allow his son to pursue his studies and go on to life of scholarship and what he described as 'authorship' without having to worry unduly about more worldly matters. The family came from the Lutheran pietist tradition, and so, as Clare Carlisle explains in the excellent book, aspired 'to a holy life that follows the example of Christ [seeking] to imitate Jesus deep, inward faith in God, and his pure-hearted obedience, humility and poverty.'

There is little doubt that Søren was a deeply religious man but also one who reflected deeply on what his faith really meant in the reality of everyday life. The focus of Kierkegaard's thought was 'what it means to exist', and more specifically to live fully as a Christian in the world. He was, however, contemptuous of the official Evangelical Lutheran Church, which was the National Church, sometimes called Church of Denmark, the established and state-supported church. Kierkegaard dismissed it and its representatives, notably his former mentors, Bishop Jacob Peter Mynster (1775 – 1854) and Hans Lassen Martenson (1808-1884), as representing Christendom rather than true Christianity. He accused them of peddling a watered-down for of the faith, designed more to comfort their bourgeois congregations than to give witness to the Gospel.

In his seminal work *Fear and Trembling*, which he published in 1843 under the pseudonym *Johannes de silentio (John of the Silence)*, Kierkegaard focuses on the Old Testament figure of Abraham, 'our father in faith', as the model for Christian faith today. While Kierkegaard tells us that he was 'appalled' by the moral scandal of Abraham's submission to God, Carlisle tells us that, like Luther, he uses 'the story [...] to expose the limitations of human reason and criticise the hubris of contemporary philosophy.' (39) Here he echoes St Paul who questioned what he saw as the pretension of the Greek philosophers (1 Corinthians 1:23).

What Kierkegaard sets out to do is to reimagine Abraham for a new generation. How, he asked his readers, could God possibly have made Abraham the father of a nation (Genesis 15) and then ask him to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22)? And why did Abraham accept? The only answer could be faith but this, he wrote, was impossible to understand in rational terms 'and [...] showed that reason should surrendered. "While Abraham arouses my admiration,' he writes, 'he appals me as well.'

However, God cannot be confined or understood in terms of purely human ethics, he argues. Carlisle suggests that 'Kierkegaard wants to shake his readers awake, to say *Look, listen* this is what the God-relationship involves, *this* is what faith requires—it might disrupt your whole existence, overturn your sense of right and wrong, make you a criminal in the eyes of the world—and *now* do you claim to have faith?'

It is a radical vision indeed and designed to banish apathy. In writing it, he is addressing individuals in the reality of their own faith lives, challenging their comfort zone and their smugness and letting them know that faith has a cost and it can indeed be very high. In effect he is challenging his own time and that mediocre form of Christianity that has taken hold. It is time he believes for a comfortable institutional Christendom, based on a rational ethics of human origin, to come to an end and to give way to something new and much more radical.

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He has long been deeply marked by Abraham's 'extraordinary faith' (43) The patriarch has become his model, who invites him to explore the dilemma of his own existence as a Christian in the world: 'how to be faithful to God—and to his own heart—within the world.' (44) He came to see Abraham as a man living fully in his own world and his relationship with God did not take him away from this but rather 'anchored him within it'. (45) He argued 'that Abraham's faith lay less in his obedient surrender of Isaac than in receiving Isaac back after giving him up. Abraham had already received an extraordinary gift when God fulfilled his promise that Sarah [...] would bear a son. This child represented Abraham's future, all his hopes...Then, years later, he was asked to sacrifice the boy, and with him the entire meaning of his own existence. He did so willingly, without losing trust in God's promise for worldly happiness. And so the divine gift was renewed; Abraham 'had faith for this life', and 'received a son a second time, "contrary to expectation".' (ibid)

Kierkegaard concludes that in his acceptance, Abraham becomes 'a knight of faith' whose 'relationship with God is entirely inward, hidden from public view'. It is beyond our ken, our human understanding, and yet it is very real. 'A divine grace sustains each step of his journey through the world, but he receives this gift secretly, in silence.' (46)

The other figure he looks at with a similar admiration is Mary, Jesus's mother, who Luke links directly to Mary in his gospel (Lk. 1: 46-55). He looks at the Mary who is depicted at the start of Luke's Gospel when she receives the message from the angel Gabriel and she conceives the divine child. Here again the situation breaks all the norms of human convention: 'at this moment she was just an obscure girl, unmarried and mysteriously pregnant; no one else saw the angel, and "no one could understand her'. But it matters little. Kierkegaard concludes: 'Is it not also true here that the one God blesses he curses in the same breath? Mary needs no worldly admiration, just as little as Abraham needed tears, for she was no heroine and he was no hero, but they both became greater than these, not being exempt from distress and torment and the paradox, but through these things'. It is a challenging vision indeed and this is a very fine book.

Claire Carlisle: *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard*, London: Allen Lane, 2019

THOUGHTS FROM KIERKEGAARD

"If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe." "It is hard to believe because it is hard to obey." "Faith is the highest passion in a human being. Many in every generation may not come that far, but none comes further."

"It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards."

"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced."



All are welcome, with a particular welcome for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, their parents, family, members, and friends: followed by chat over tea and coffee. Third Sunday of each month at 3.30 pm in Avila Carmelite Centre, Bloomfield Avenue (off Morehampton Road), Donnybrook, Dublin 4, D04 YF66. Website: www.allarewelcomemass.com

- Sunday 15th December 2019 (3rd Sunday of Advent)
- Sunday 19th January 2020 (2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time)
- Sunday 16th February 2020 (6th Sunday in Ord. Time)
- Sunday 15th March 2020 (3rd Sunday of Lent)
- Sunday 19th April 2020 (2nd Sunday of Easter – Divine Mercy Sunday)
- Sunday 17th May 2020 (6th Sunday of Easter)
- Sunday 21st June 2020 (12th Sunday in Ordinary Time)

IN MEMORIAM

N/A to be announced

Masses and Confession

- Sundays:** Vigil, 6pm (Saturday), 9.30am, 11am, 5pm
- Croatian Community Mass 6.30pm
- Messe en français 12.30 (2^e et 4^e dimanche du mois)
- Daily masses 10am and 12.40pm, Saturday 10am only
- Rosary daily after 10am mass

Adoration Blessed Sacrament, Weds 10.30-12.40

LAST WEEK'S COLLECTIONS

N/A