

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

One of my favourite movie actors is Kevin Spacey. Spacey has that rarest of qualities: the ability to be unassuming and ordinary. Unlike many superstars he injects a realism and authenticity into the parts he plays. Take as an example the movie 'The Negotiator' in which Spacey plays a police negotiator. His job is to talk down hostage takers and all number of scary scenarios to which a big city police force is called. Basically his character's job is saves lives through talking.

One of the first scenes in the film has Spacey apparently doing just that. Kneeling at a doorway he is patiently negotiating with someone on the other side. In this scene we learn that Spacey is the model of a true negotiator. He is patient, he listens, and he doesn't pass judgment unless it is absolutely necessary. The audience starts to wonder whether the person in the next room has a weapon. But as the scene unravels we realize that he isn't talking to a criminal. Rather, he is trying to get his young daughter to extract herself from the bathroom. It's a comic scene, and its one that I can identify with readily having an active toddler in the house. But the scene has a serious purpose, it lets the audience know that being a negotiator for Spacey is not just a job, it's a gift that permeates his whole being. And so, the stage has been set for the movie viewer to think that we are truly in the presence of someone for whom negotiation is a way of life.

This morning's readings are also about negotiation. In Genesis the scene is almost identical to the movie. Only

rather than talking to a hostage taker, Abraham is negotiating with God. It's a strange reading for us, as we're not brought up to think of God as someone with whom we make deals. But then I don't think the story is meant to be about bartering with God.

Its true that Abraham is playing the role of a negotiator, pleading with God to spare the lives of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. And it is not a little scary to note that if Abraham is the negotiator that means God is the hostage taker, or at least, the one who is threatening to destruction.

You might be forgiven for thinking that this presents God in a very unhealthy light. And you would be right. It hardly appears that God is a just or caring figure if he can be roused to such great anger. But that is only at first sight. The story actually seems to be less about God's vengeance and more about God's mercy.

The truly astonishing thing about the Genesis story is how God responds to Abraham's negotiation. Far from this being a negative story about God I believe that taking Abraham seriously tells us an enormous amount about the nature of God. It tells us that God responds to human concerns. God does in fact care about the fate of ordinary people. And perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that God cannot make the world a better and more just place without our intervention.

There has been a temptation in the churches and in academia to define God as all powerful, all good, and all knowing. It's an approach that is intellectually attractive because it is so neat. But the problem with such an

account of God is that it makes God a static concept that can be possessed rather than an active and sometimes disturbing reality. Philosophers and theologians alike reel from the God of Abraham because the God of the intellect is meant to be unchanging. But of course the beauty of the story of Abraham the negotiator is that God is a God of change.

Of course, change can be threatening. And we are all familiar with changes that are less than positive. But the change Abraham brought was life-giving. And week by week in the Church we are asked to believe that we too participate in a life-giving change.

The act of sharing bread and wine is nothing if it is not a transformative change. While Episcopalians have never agreed on what exactly changes at communion, we are united in seeing sacraments as moments of intersection between God and humanity. Regardless of which words are spoken or sung, regardless of who the participants are, we are called to believe that in communion God embraces us and makes change possible at the deepest level of our being. This is not to say that God dislikes us for who we are right now. But neither does God want us to be untouched and unaltered by the gift of Christ's presence among us.

The God revealed in bread and wine calls each one of us to be negotiators like Abraham. We, too have to give God the opportunity to create change in our world. And that means taking the time to do what Jesus in the Gospel asks his disciples to do: to pray that God's kingdom come. Like the story of Abraham, the prayer, Abba, Father, reminds us that God is profoundly involved in

human affairs. God is the one who Jesus prays not to bring us to trial. Once again this last week we have seen just how awful the things are that humans can do and suffer. And once again we are in shock, grieving for those whose lives have been tragically taken. If there can be any truly Christian reflection to such acts other than silence, it is that God continues to experience the pain and suffering alongside those caught up in evil acts. But, that too is a heresy amongst the thinkers of the classical concept of God. For them God cannot suffer change. But the living God is above all a God of compassion, suffering alongside those who suffer. Just as the real God for Jesus is the one who will forgive us our sins.

One of the things that Jesus and Abraham share is that they are cheeky chappies, they are presumptuous. They say things that well heeled and genteel folk would rather not say. And they make us uncomfortable as a result. If we come to church seeking comfort and stability rather than challenge and change, we will be upset by the likes of Abraham and Jesus. I doubt that the friend who was woken up at midnight was particularly impressed by his friend's temerity in waking him. And for many Episcopalians our natural inclination is to identify with reticence and be among those who would really rather not rock the boat.

But Jesus was a professional boat rocker. And those who would call themselves his followers need to rock the boats of perceived wisdom and hallowed tradition. Which bring to mind the old Episcopal gag: If something happens for the first time it's a radical innovation. If it is repeated just once, it's a hallowed tradition.

As followers of Christ, we are all called to hear the words of Christ and step away from the comfort of easy habits and unreflective actions. If God's church is to grow in love and in truth Christ needs us to be willing to knock on new doors and to search for fresh ways to minister to our world.

But this work can only begin if we learn to negotiate with one of the hardest people any one can deal with. And I don't mean God, nor do I have in mind a particularly unpleasant person. No, the hardest of all people to negotiate with are our own selves. Each of us has the capacity to be our own worst enemy. And most of us are well schooled at resisting the kind of change that we know deep down might actually be beneficial. To pray Christ's intimate prayer to God is to recognize that if we are to transform our world, we have to start with ourselves. Christians are not called to judge others. Instead, Christians are those who, through prayer and reflection discover that even the worst sins are forgiven.

And so as we remember Abraham and Jesus revealing God's mercy through intercession and through presumptuousness, so may we discover the true nature of God's love in prayer and action. God needs all of us to help negotiate a better world for all people. For as God loves all humanity, so regardless of age, race, sexuality, gender or social status every person manifests the enormity of God's all encompassing love. I am sure that many of you know that the English word negotiate comes from the Latin negotium, which literally translated means business. Well, the business of the church has always been love and forgiveness. And none of that will change. But, God willing, we will change. And with God's

blessing, we will find ourselves more committed to negotiating the love and forgiveness that is God's gift to all people. Amen.