# On the First Gulf War

**Saddam Hussein's road to ruin stretches for 100 miles up the highway from Kuwait City to the Iraqi border at Safwan. It is a road of horror, destruction and shame…. The dead are strewn across the road only five miles out of Kuwait City and you see them still as you approach the Iraqi frontier…. I lost count of the Iraqi corpses crammed into the smouldering wreckage or slumped, face down in the sand. In scale and humiliation it was, I suppose, a little like Napoleon's retreat from Moscow**

**(Robert Fisk in *The Independent*, 2 March).**

**It has reminded me more of the destruction of the First World War trenches, especially on this Third Sunday in Lent when we read the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Not long before he died in those trenches Wilfred Owen wrote a poem comprising a midrash on Genesis 22:**

**So Abraham rose, and clave the wood and went,**

**And. took the fire with him, and a knife.**

**And as they sojourned both of them together,**

**Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,**

**Behold the preparations, fire and iron.**

**But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?**

**Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,**

**And builded parapets and trenches there,**

**And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.**

**When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,**

**Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad.**

**Neither do anything to him. Behold,**

**A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;**

**Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.**

**But the old man would not so, but slew his son.**

**An d half the seed of Europe , one by one.**

**There are people who are clear that the Gulf War was right and good: in the United States last month I saw a car with a huge bumper—sticker urging, "Kick some Arab ass." There are other people who are clear that the Gulf War was wrong and evil: the World Council of Churches seems to have taken this view. I wish I could be thus unequivocal about it. It seems to me to have been right, but evil. It was right, because Saddam Hussein had to be resisted and the people of Kuwait freed. It was evil, because it involved killing scores of thousands of people made in God’s image, fathers and brothers and sons and husbands now desolately mourned. I do not know whether we could have avoided the slaughter on the Kuwait—Iraq highway, but even if it was inevitable, the slain were people who had already long been also the victims of the oppressor as well as oppressors themselves. The Gulf War was brought about by Saddam's pride, but also by ours.**

**Our response to the end of the war is rightly relief and satisfaction that a necessary task has been undertaken, and we might ring church bells to acknowledge that. But the right response is also repentance: repentance for helping Saddam to bui1d his mi1itary might, repentance for fai1ing to take action over the running sores in middle eastern relationships which largely derive from Western policies over a century, and repentance for the slaughter of the trenches and that on the road of horror, destruction and shame, repentance which takes action so that the evils do not recur. For God bade Abraham not sacrifice his Isaac.**

**It is as well for us that, like Abraham, God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.**