

Sunday, February 15, 2018

1st Sunday in Lent (B)

Conventual Mass

God's Covenant, God's Love

Outside of Scriptures, we do not use the word covenant very often. Our world is a world tied together by contracts. Contracts are legalistic. If one side reneges on a contract, the contract becomes null and void. The other party is no longer bound. A covenant in the Old Testament bound the participants, whether conquering king with vanquished subjects or between two individuals by ties that could never be broken. The participants of a covenant entered into a relationship which was second only to the bond of blood.ⁱ

In the ritual at Mt. Sinai, in which the Israelites bound themselves by covenant to God, the blood of the sacrificial animals was sprinkled on the altar, representing God, and on the people. By the

symbolism of this ritual, God and the Israelites became one blood, one family.ⁱⁱ At the Last Supper, Jesus calls his blood the “blood of the new covenant.” As the blood of the old covenant united the partners in a kinship bond, so the blood of Jesus now unites God the Father and the Christian.ⁱⁱⁱ

The thread of the covenant runs throughout the Bible. God’s initiation of, and binding himself by covenants speak volumes about God’s love and concern for us.^{iv} In our first reading today, we read of God’s covenant with Noah. Sin broke out in the world, spread like a disease until it consumed all the inhabitants of the world except Noah and his family. In describing the disaster, the author of Genesis says that God was so sickened by the state of affairs, that he regretted having created and placed humans on

the earth. This may be anthropomorphic, but it insightfully attributes to God the feelings and thoughts of parents in despair over their children's behavior. It gives a gut-level sense of the love God has for creatures. The destructive Flood is actually followed by a covenant made not only with the human race, but also with the entire cosmos. It promises to preserve not only human beings, but every creature "that was with you," no matter what will happen through human fault. The covenant made with Noah shows God's goodness and mercy. And so Noah becomes a new Adam from whom all future generations will descend; and so God hangs the rainbow in the sky, symbol of the path between heaven and earth.^v

In addition to the covenant made with Noah, the major moments in Israel's history were marked by covenants: The covenant made with Abraham, the central covenant of Sinai, made with the entire people of Israel, and the covenant God made with David, which was to ensure that one of his line would be king forever. This was fulfilled in an extraordinary way in the person of Jesus. With Jesus, both fully divine and fully human, God became bonded to our race that made physically manifest in a way never before known, God's infinite love and compassion for us.

In addition to our human nature, we are bonded to God through Christ by our baptism into his death and resurrection. But like all family ties there are the obligations we have entered into: obligations not of law, but of love. By baptism we have become

children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ. In our free response to God's covenant, we are called to become faithful sons and daughters of God. And since in God alone is our lasting happiness, our true home, our only security, God's call to covenant responsibility is also the only path to happiness, to wholeness, to our fulfillment.

But each of us knows the frailty we encounter in ourselves. Romano Guardini wrote well when he wrote that "We are not Christians, but in the process of becoming Christians." And it is for this reason that Christ, that the church calls us always to begin again, to turn ever more deeply to the God who has made his covenant of love with us, with whom we are tied by the closest bonds of kinship. It is for this reason that Lent is a time of joy, a time of renewal, a time in

which we renew our baptismal promises to continue our journey to the One, who ever since the beginning of creation has shown nothing but love to us and calls us by the covenant made by Christ, to be family.

Now at the beginning of Lent a trumpet call sounded on Ash Wednesday to rouse us from our sleep and to reawaken in us the realization of God's love for us, Christ's victory and to make it actual in our lives. "Repent and believe in the gospel." Jesus Christ himself is the good news and in him the kingdom has come.

In his rule, St. Benedict writes that "The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent "(RB 49:1). He is not thinking of the fasting, the doing without with which we associate Lent, although there is a place for that. Rather he is thinking of a conversion of the

heart as it is expressed in our exterior actions especially as they effect our neighbor. What is implied rather is that we should live lives in awareness of what it means to be baptized in Christ, to suffer with him and to rise with him. Satan, evil and death no longer have dominion over us. That is good news indeed, reason for rejoicing. Yes, sorrow for sin in face of this great outpouring of divine love is healthy, but it is a sorrow filled with joy and gratitude. The practices we assume in Lent whether they are denials of creature comforts or additional practices of prayer and works of charity are not ends in themselves but reminders of what we are all about.

Lent exists only in its relation to Easter. And it is the joy of Christ's resurrection that needs to permeate

not only this season but all our lives. Repent, rejoice
and believe in the gospel.

i" McKenzie, John L., Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee, Wis., Bruce, 1965) 154

ii" McKenzie, John L., 155

iii" McKenzie, John L., 156

iv" Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (N.Y., Paulist Press, 1994) 218

v" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.2, Lent (Collegeville, Minn, The Liturgical Press, 1993) 488, 49