

Covenants, Old and New

Session 1

Introduction

What is a covenant? It's an agreement, a compact; the word comes to us, through French, from the same Latin root as "convention." Not a convention as in Rotarians or Shriners, but as in the Geneva Convention -- an agreement between nations, a treaty. It is in that sense that it is conventionally used to translate the Hebrew word *berith*, itself used to describe agreements between individuals, peoples, and most importantly, between God and God's people. The latter covenant, God's Covenant with Israel, is the pre-eminent way used in the Hebrew Bible to depict the relationship between God and humankind. Its later depictions are coloured by the awareness of prophets and others that humankind had failed to live up to its side of the covenant relationship, while God's covenant love and faithfulness continued. It is this that at least partly underlies the hope in a new covenant to which Jeremiah gives voice.

The Covenant is not spoken of quite so frequently in the Christian Bible but it remains fundamental to the understanding of God's relationship with us, now expressed through Christ. Jesus uses the Covenant in describing his saving work when he institutes the Eucharist, thus keeping the concept at the centre of the Church's life. Paul and the anonymous author of the letter to the Hebrews both meditate on what this new covenant

might mean in practice and its implications for the old covenant. Especially recently, the Church has used the pervasive image of the covenant to focus our thoughts on the ongoing place of another sacrament, baptism, in our relationship with God and with one another.

However seminal the idea of 'covenant' has been, it has drawbacks as well as advantages, and we need to be aware of them. A modern covenant between nations is quite different from the kind of treaties that existed in Old Testament times, and which God used in God's dealings with Noah, Abraham, and others. Using a human political model, that of the relationship between a subject state and an imperial ruler, to depict the relationship between God and God's people brings some unfortunate baggage into the mix. This may be part of the reason why we see the idea of a testament, suggested by the fact that in Greek the same word that means testament or will was used to translate *berith*, take hold as a new model in the New Testament.

We can read the succession of covenants in the Bible as delineating a process in which the focus is gradually narrowed and then opened up again. In the first covenant, Noah and his family stand for all of humanity; in the covenant with Abraham and then Moses, the focus has narrowed to Abraham's descendants and indeed one branch of them. In Jeremiah's time, only a faithful remnant remained. By the New Testament, we can argue that the covenant people has shrunk down to a very small group indeed, Jesus, who in his wilderness temptations recapitulated Israel's wilderness journey in the Exodus, and his disciples. Then suddenly through the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus' death and resurrection the focus once again widens to include, potentially, all humankind again.

The purpose of our study together over the next five weeks is to read some of the

most important passages in Scripture about the Covenant, and try to understand better how it still is expressed in our relationship with God now.

Part I *Blessing and Promise*

First Reading: Gen 9.1-17

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,

by a human shall that person’s blood be shed;

for in his own image

God made humankind.

And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.’

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy

the earth.’ God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

Focus

Many commentators have described the story of the Flood and the covenant with Noah as the story of a second Creation. What parallels are there between the flood and the creation story? This is the first covenant that God makes in the Bible. Why does God want to make a covenant anyway? Why now? What are its terms? With whom does he make it?

Session 2 *Second Reading: Gen 15.1-21*

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ But the word of the Lord came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, ‘I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’ But he said, ‘O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.’ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, ‘Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. As

for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'

Focus

With this covenant, God addresses Abraham's growing unease. He has twice been promised an inheritance and yet he has no children and he and his wife are too old for children. The form of the covenant follows that used by many Near Eastern cultures at the time but the content is something unique. The first covenant accompanied a blessing; this one accompanies a promise. In what other ways do they differ? How is the promise fulfilled? What is Abraham's righteousness?

Session 3: Part II *Covenant and Law*

Third Reading: Ex 19.1-25; 20.18-21; 24.1-18

At the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.’

So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one: ‘Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.’

When Moses had told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses: ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come

down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, “Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.” When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.’ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, ‘Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.’ On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look; otherwise many of them will perish. Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them.’ Moses said to the Lord, ‘The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, “Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.”’ The Lord said to him, ‘Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord; otherwise he will break out against them.’ So Moses went down to the people and told

them.

[The Ten Commandments: Ex 20.1-17]

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.’ Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

[The Covenant Code: Ex 20.22-23.33]

Then he said to Moses, ‘Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. Moses alone shall come near the Lord; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.’

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, ‘All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt-offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ Moses

took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, ‘See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank. The Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.’ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, ‘Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.’

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Focus

The text in square brackets briefly describes what has been left out in making this selection. The story of this covenant is more complex than those that we've seen before. Who is involved in it? What are the different stages they go through as the covenant is

made? What is needed to seal and signify this covenant after it has been made? We saw the covenants with Noah and with Abram/Abraham picked up and commented on in the New Testament -- how is this one portrayed there?

Session 4: Part III *Promise of a New Covenant*

Fourth Reading: Jer 31.31-4, 32.38-41

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

[Jer 31.35-32.40]

They shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing good to them, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

For thus says the Lord: Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good fortune that I now promise them.

Focus

Why does God want a new covenant? Why is it needed? Why now? How will it be different from the old covenant?

Part IV *Promise Fulfilled*

Fifth Reading: Lk 22.14-23

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!' Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

Focus

Does this new covenant look like what you expected from Jeremiah? How does the blood of this covenant contrast with the blood of the covenant with Moses? What about the two meals?

Session 5

Sixth Reading: Heb 8.6-9.22

But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

God finds fault with them when he says:

‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord,

when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel

and with the house of Judah;

not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors,

on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt;

for they did not continue in my covenant,

and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel

after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their minds,

and write them on their hearts,

and I will be their God,

and they shall be my people.

And they shall not teach one another

or say to each other, “Know the Lord”,

for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.
For I will be merciful towards their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.'

In speaking of 'a new covenant', he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies. In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy-seat. Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.

Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Hence not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you.' And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Focus

Many believe the author of Hebrews was from a priestly background, because he focuses

so much on the contrast between the two sanctuaries, the one established under the old covenant and that established under the new covenant. Here we see the contrasts between old and new worked out in greater detail than in either Jeremiah or Luke, and also the claim made explicit that the new covenant is a better one. What are the differences? How is it better? What does the author mean when he refers to "regulations ... imposed until the time comes to set things right"? What is that time? What should our life under the new covenant be like?

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