

Covenant

We use two words interchangeably in the Christian tradition: *testament*, and *covenant*. What is a covenant? It is a binding agreement sealed by an oath; it should be real and reliable as the people who make it; while they survive, it survives.

By My Own Self I Swear It

A covenant made with God is therefore the ultimate in terms of reliability. Thinking about this, I am driven to ask: how does this leave Jewish people? Did not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ make a binding covenant with them? We cannot regard that covenant as *lapsed*, even on the grounds that the human partner is always unreliable. God never revokes his choice, as the Scriptures often say: *though we are unfaithful, he is always faithful, for he cannot disown his own self.*

The Faithful Promises Of God

Today we read the story of Isaac, the firstfruits of God's covenant with Abraham, *that he should be the father of a multitude*. The promise holds good; because the descent from Abraham was accompanied by the keeping of the faith of Abraham, so that the Covenant with God continued to be held in awe by Abraham's descendants. What, then, has happened to the covenant on God's side, where he swore to the Israelites, *You shall be "Iy people; and I shall be your God?* The answer to that question was memorably given by Paul (2Cor1 :20) who says: *However many the promises God made, the "Yes" to all of them is in Jesus Christ.* The faith that Jesus is the ultimate sign of God's faithfulness *to Israel* is nearly impossible for a Jew to believe; and the appalling enmity which has darkened the water between Christian and Jew has not made it easier. But we must always try to redress the balance by remembering that Jesus was the greatest of all the Israelites, and that his faithfulness to God was the fulfilling of the Old Covenant, in so complete a way that he himself becomes the heart of a New Covenant -which does not sweep away the Old; it fulfils

it. We should not, therefore, speak dismissively of the Old Testament, as if God had decided to revoke it. We must speak of it with awe, because Jesus died to fulfil it. When we celebrate the Mass, we are celebrating the sacrifice which completes the Old Testament - from God's side, by his Son's accompanying God's people to the very end of their earthly journey, by

his lying beside us in the tomb; and from our side, by a man giving himself in perfect obedience and generosity to the Father, for the reconciliation of a lost "world. In Jesus, God and humanity do a final deed to keep the covenant perfectly.

The Human Family

It is against that stupendous backdrop that a Christian family sees its vocation. The family is created by a covenant too; it is a marriage between human beings, and therefore carries a risk (as God's covenant did) of failure. But this covenant (at least in Catholic thinking) is made in God, and therefore acquires a particular strength and permanence; it is a sacrament, and in it God comes to meet our weakness and enables us to reach beyond our own resources: a further consequence of the Incarnation. Just as the family of Abraham became the vehicle of the old covenant, so the Christian family is upheld by more than the strengths of its members. It is because of this mystery that the Christian family can hope for great things!

A Place For Elijah

It is traditional to set an extra place at the table in Jewish homes on Passover night, in case Elijah -the forerunner of the Messiah should choose this time and place for his expected return. We, who share at the table of Jesus, are the intimate guests of the Messiah. That fact must transform us, and glorify the life of our families. *Fr Philip*