

In this fifth Sunday we shall find gathered together many of the themes we have already met in the last three Sundays. A pattern of conversion has emerged, which transforms our obvious *human* horror at the Crucifixion into the *divine* life in human mode.

In the awfulness of the Cross we see the distance between our life and the eternal joy of God: but the liturgy assures us that *the two are recognisably one thing*, and this understanding transfigures other forms of human agony into the place of promise, the place of covenant between God and each one of us.

If we'd studied the Testing in the Wilderness we should have discovered the Bible's re-visiting of the temptation of Adam and Eve, with the weakness of the flesh fully present, and the divine word being spoken to Satan by the Son of God who is man, the new Adam. We discovered that the Agony in the Garden is an agony because of human nature: but it is a story of triumph because of Jesus' divine fidelity: *and Jesus is a man*.

The Cleansing of the Temple feels like a negative visitation because of human frailty, but it is really God lifting up human religion to be divine - in the sacrifice that is going to complete all sacrifice.

Last week we heard Jesus' words in the darkness to Nicodemus, about the raising up of the Son of Man - in Crucifixion because of human nature, but in resurrection and ascension to the Father because it is the Son who is raised, and that is what eternally happens to the Son: *but Jesus is still a man*, and his being lifted up is *one thing*.

Perhaps if we sustain the point of these liturgies, we shall see our human weakness in a far more positive light - see it as God sees it; and we shall find our weakness much closer to God, and to the mystery of redemption, than we had previously thought.

## **A New Covenant**

We should have an immensely positive response to the word *covenant* - the Greek *diatheke*, the Hebrew *berith*. Covenants are well-known between people: solemn treaties, personal promises, and the marriage-covenant are areas where a legally binding element reinforces the words of fidelity.

Some features characterise the stories of covenants in the Old Testament; the first is the presence in the account of the word "cut"; then there is a divine attestation; then the details of the agreement are set forth; then there follows the oath, a sacrifice, and a shared meal.

Where there is already blood relationship, a legal bond between people already exists. Where there is no blood relationship, the covenant makes its participants brothers and sisters no less firmly than blood. Respect for a covenant is also a religious duty, and therefore no stronger bond could be thinkable. It may be that the presence of blood in the ritual represents kinship. In Genesis 15:4ff God makes a covenant with Abraham to allay Abraham's insecurity. The passing between the dissected animals is explained in Jeremiah 34: 18ff; the oath invokes a curse, that if the testator breaks the covenant, he is to be cloven in two like the animals.

The presence of a *covenant* is a recognition that the values involved are so seriously important that the relationship must not be subject to revision because of changes of mood or circumstances. It isn't that the covenanters must doubt one another. What they're saying is: *this is how we are now, and this is also how we see ourselves being in future: but even if everything changes, and the future isn't what we expect, we shall still hold firm to our*

*promise today.* That understanding turns it from “a piece of paper” into a huge act of faith which depends on the people who make the covenant: they are identifying their promise with themselves: *as long as we live, this promise will bind us.*

### **Covenant with God**

Where a covenant involves human beings with God, it is of a different order. God, the unchangeable, eternal one, does not need to make any covenant. It is for our sake that he “commits” himself, demanding on our side a recognition of the fidelity of God and his eternity, the unchanging stability of his attitude towards us; and the covenant with God seeks to create the space in us where human fidelity can furnish a direct response to what is eternal. So despite the first reading’s line, *See, I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel,* we really only see the House of Israel understanding in a new way what God has always been like towards them. Obviously God is not doing anything new, or changing his mind about us, or cutting us a new deal. He’s just doing what he is always doing: being divine.

Covenants with God, in the end, only take effect on the human side. We are changed by them; and by this new one, we see our whole nature changed. So the new covenant is said not to resemble the ancient covenant of Sinai, the Exodus covenant. In what way will the new one differ?

*They broke that Covenant of mine, so I had to show them who was master.*

That says something about the human effect of the covenant, but nothing at all about the divine side. So the new covenant will differ in that it will be written, not on tablets of stone, but on the living hearts of the people. But what will be its terms? Here the prophet can find nothing new to say, except to repeat the Deuteronomic formula: *I will be their God, and they will be my people.* If this is written on human hearts, they can no longer defect from it.

Two weeks ago we read the Commandments, which express the belonging of the people to God after Sinai. The Jews referred to these as “the Ten Words” - in Greek, the Decalogue. Now we hear of a law that will no longer be external, but “written on the heart”. What will its terms be? Well, there will no longer be ten words.

We only know one Word who truly expresses God: and he has shown us his heart, and the way in which the will of God is written there, so that his obedience to the Father is total and identical with himself: he himself is our Covenant with God and its perfect fulfilment. In John’s fifth chapter Jesus tells us what it is like:

*In all truth I tell you, by himself the Son can do nothing; he can do only what he sees the Father doing.; and whatever the Father does, the Son does too. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him everything he himself does (Jn 5:19f)*

*The Father judges no-one: he has entrusted all judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father: whoever refuses honour to the Son refuses honour to the Father who sent him (Jn 5: 21b-23)*

*As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself: and because he is Son of man, has granted him power to give judgment (Jn 5: 26f)*

*By myself I can do nothing; I can judge only as I am told to judge, and my judging is just, because I seek to do, not my own will, but the will of him who sent me. (Jn 5: 30)*

These concepts of God entrusting his power of judgement to the Son show us where the New Covenant is written: in the human heart of the Son.

In chapter seven he goes further in explaining how the word he proclaims is from the Father:

*My teaching is not from myself; it comes from the One who sent me; anyone who is prepared to do his will will know whether my teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own account. When someone speaks on his own account he is seeking honour for himself; but when he is seeking the honour of the person who sent him, then he is true, and altogether without dishonesty.*

But the major confrontation with the Pharisees happens in chapter eight. Jesus, the Word of God who carries the covenant written on his heart, the unique herald of God to the earth, the Son who does the Father's will, is arraigned of self-promotion and blasphemy. Things in the law-court which is the Fourth Gospel have almost reached the point of breakdown. Although Jesus' whole life is being poured out for the love of the Father, he is still the minister of God to the world. He can only show his nature to them by fidelity to his eternal rôle of Sonship. They refuse this witness precisely because of its humility: it is clothed most patently in humanity, and yet claims divine and universal meaning:

*I AM the light of the world:  
anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark,  
but will have the light of life.*

At this the Pharisees said to him: *You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not true.* Jesus replied:

*Even though I am testifying on my own behalf, my testimony is still true, because I know where I have come from and where I am going.*

*You judge by human standards. I judge no-one; but if I judge, my judging will be true, because I am not alone: the One who sent me is with me, and in your Law it stands written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I testify on my own behalf: but the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf too.*

They asked him, *Where is your Father, then?*

Jesus answered:

*You do not know me, nor do you know my Father.*

*If you did know me, you would know my Father too.*

We are now in the realm of total contradiction. Jesus is bordering on the point where he tells them that they must choose between acceptance of his claims, or the loss of their own Covenant with God.

*You are from below; I am from above.  
You are of this world, I am not of this world.  
I have told you already: You will die in your sins.  
Yes, if you do not believe that I AM HE,  
You will die in your sins.*

They said to him, *Who are you?*

Jesus answered:

*What from the outset I have told you.*

*About you I have much to say, and much to judge.*

*But the One who sent me is true,*

*and what I declare to the world is what I have learnt from him.*

At this they accuse him of being a Samaritan - a man who does not have reliable religion - and of demonic possession. The first is a cheap gibe against a Galilean; the second is a serious accusation, which is levelled at Jesus in the Synoptics too. Jesus replies to it:

*I am not possessed: but I honour the Father, and you deny me honour.  
I do not seek my own glory;  
there is someone who does seek it and is the judge of it.  
In all truth I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.  
The Jews said: Now we know you are possessed. Abraham is dead, and the prophets are dead: you say, Whoever keeps my word will never know the taste of death: Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? The prophets are dead too. Who are you claiming to be?  
Jesus answered: If I were to seek my own glory, my glory would be worth nothing; in fact, my glory is conferred by the Father: by the one of whom you say 'He is our God', though you do not know him, and if I were to say 'I do not know him' I would be a liar, as you yourselves are liars.  
But I do know him, and keep his word.  
Your father Abraham rejoiced to think that he would see my Day;  
he saw it, and was glad.*

The Jews then said, *You are not fifty yet, and you have seen Abraham!*  
Jesus replied,  
*In all truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was,  
I AM!*

At this they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and left the Temple.

The language Jesus uses of the word of the Father (*I have kept it*) would serve just as well for a covenant; the name of God which he solemnly takes to himself here is the one revealed to Moses on the threshold of the Exodus by the God who summons his people to the Covenant of Sinai. What is totally new in these encounters is the way in which Jesus claims such plenipotentiary authority for himself. The idea of any rabbi, even the greatest of the prophets, making such claims for himself, is unthinkable. What Jesus says is in effect: *If you accept me, you can be the people of God, and you can live in eternity. If you reject me, you repudiate the God of Israel who sent me, and there will be no remedy.*

At the end of the tenth chapter, Jesus is once more in the Temple, and once more makes a breathtaking claim. The Jews say, *if you are the Christ, tell us plainly.* He replies:

*I have told you, but you do not believe.  
The works I do in my Father's name are my witness,  
but you do not believe because you are no sheep of mine.  
The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice: I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life: they will never be lost,  
and no-one will ever steal them from my hand.  
The Father, for what he has given to me, is greater than anyone;  
and no-one can steal from the Father. The Father and I are One.*

The Jews fetched stones to stone him so Jesus said to them:  
*I have shown you many good works from my Father: for which of these are you stoning me?* The Jews answered him: *We are stoning you, not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy: though you are only a man, you claim to be God.*  
Jesus answered: *Is it not written in your Law, 'I said: you are gods'?*  
*So it uses the word 'gods' of those to whom the word was addressed - and Scripture cannot be set aside. Yet to someone the father has consecrated and sent into the world you say 'You are blaspheming' because I say 'I am Son of God'. If I am not doing my Father's work, there is no need to believe me. But if I am doing it, then even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the*

*work I do; then you will know for certain that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.*

They again wanted to arrest him then, but he eluded their grasp.

In these citations from John we have been watching the growing rejection of Jesus by his fellow-men (whom John keeps calling “the Jews”). They are drawn as behaving exactly as their forebears did: rejecting the prophets God sends to them. But there is a solemnity in Jesus’ warning that did not attach to the rejection of the prophets. Now they are rejecting God’s Son; and if they cannot accept God’s Son, they cannot accept their own salvation. Their accusation, that he is blasphemous when he suggests that a human being might share the life of God, effectively closes down the possibility of their own becoming divine: that is, their own salvation. They are calling the salvation Jesus is offering them a blasphemy. They decide that if he continues to insist on it, they will condemn him to death. In this sense, their daring to condemn the Son of God actually passes judgment on themselves. That is why he says: *If you do not believe me, you will die in your sins.*

The point is that Jesus is not trying to sell them some future possibility, some unearthly hope which seems unreal to them. Nor is he trying to explain a set of concepts to them, a complicated theological faith. What he is asking them to accept is the fulness of his own being - as the Son of God made human. That’s why his teaching is characterised by the words *I AM*....together with its correlatives (bread of life, true shepherd, light of the world, way-truth-life, vine, resurrection. That’s also why he can’t backtrack on his demand. They have to accept it, or reject the whole project of creation and salvation in which they claim to believe. There, if you like, is the *crisis* - the moment of judgment for the world. Jesus is the covenant with the Father, and if we reject him, we exclude our own salvation.