

The relationship God has with us is mysterious, and we cannot see through to its fulfilment. The Covenant of God is mysterious, and we cannot draw the limits of our responsibility or count the cost of our keeping it. The promise of God is mysterious, and the working-out of his faithfulness is sometimes impenetrable to us, and we say *why have you forsaken us* when our obedience to him is at its terrifying height.

Abram today is told that he is dear to God, and that God will not forsake him; but Abram responds with his own feeling of poverty and disappointment: *I go childless.*

Then look at the awesome experience of covenant: the divided carcasses forming a path of carnage - all vegetarians look away now - and the two parties to the Covenant pass between them; the twilight, and the dark wings of vultures, the blood and the silence of what is dead. Then the onset of the darkness, and a dream of blazing fire, as the promise of God is put into words, and Abram's descendants, as yet unseen, become the heirs of God.

What strikes me about a story like this is that the forces it unleashes are dangerous ones. The violence of sacrifice broods over it; when God meets humanity there is terror, and the thought of violation is never far away. Indeed, human power skates a thin line between good and evil; there is a thin line between devotion and obsession, between courage and cruelty, between generosity and the loss of everything. These are the mysterious paths trodden by prophets, to whom the word of God comes as liberating power and angel of death; it is the place where martyrs go, where the true love of God costs them their own blood.

So in our own lives; there is a line we hope to tread between fruitfulness and condemnation: the greatness of harvest, and the cutting-down and burning of a failed tree. This is the only way for us to go, the only way that has the message of eternal life. No wonder Jesus said in yesterday's Gospel

*It is a broad and spacious road that leads to damnation, and many take it.
But it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and few find it.*