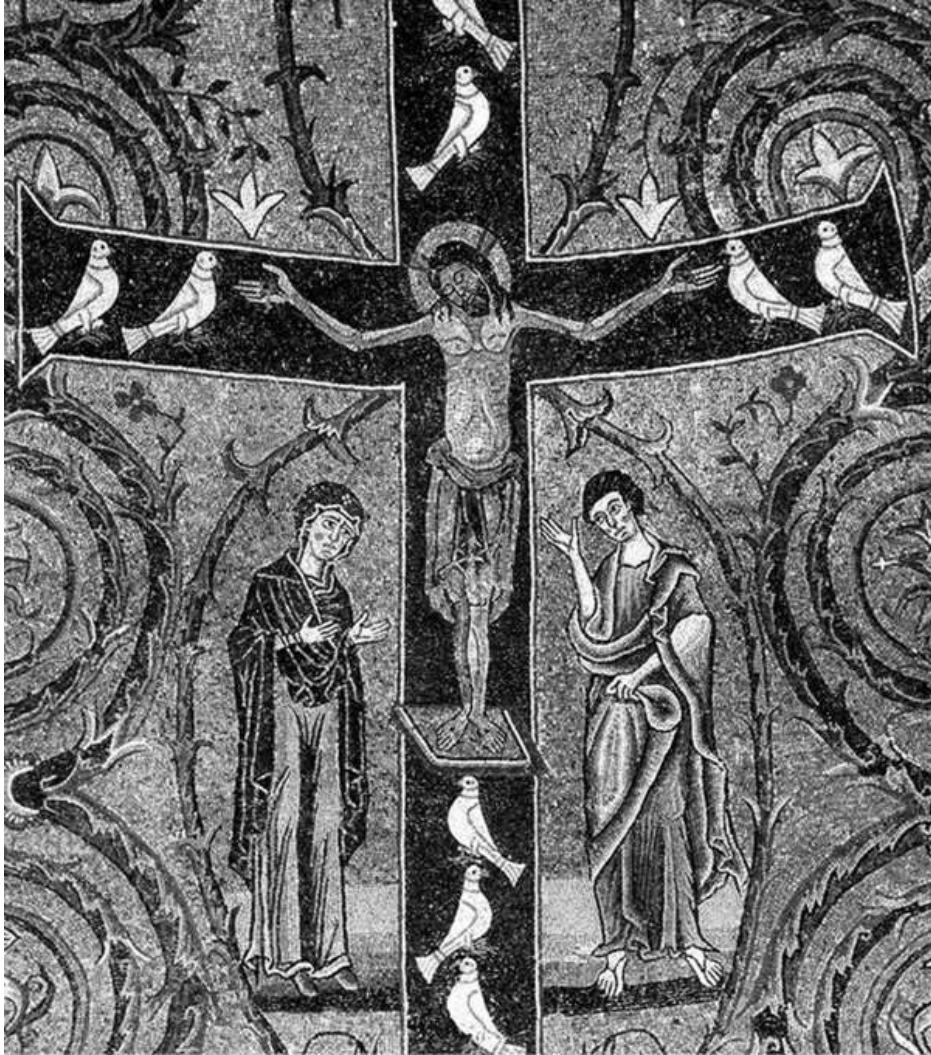


A COVENANT WITH GOD



A Journey through Lent 2021

Introduction

On Sundays we hear three readings from the Bible at Mass. The first is usually from the Old Testament, and is generally chosen as an introduction to the Gospel reading for the day. During Lent the Old Testament reading comes into its own, and sets us on a journey through the story of God's relationship with his people, and prepares the way for the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus which we celebrate together in the events of Holy Week.

There is a three-year cycle of readings for Sunday Mass, and this year we are in 'Year B', with the Gospel passages coming predominantly from St Mark. In each of the three years the Lent Old Testament passages carry the same purpose, taking us through stages of discovery about the character, nature and purpose of Almighty God. They invite us to explore the deep questions of how we can know God, of how we know what his purpose for us is, of how we can have a relationship with him, and how we experience him when times seem difficult.

These are the questions we'll be looking at in this booklet which you can use either on your own, or in conversation with others in your parish community. There is a reflection for each week of Lent leading up to Holy Week with some questions to ponder. A video introduction to the themes of this booklet from the Bishop of Fulham will be shared via the social media feeds of The Society.

Readers should note that there are a couple of Sundays when the lectionary adapted for Common Worship differs from that of the Roman Missal, and we follow the more widely used Missal readings here.

The First Week of Lent

CAN I KNOW GOD?

Genesis 9.8-15

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.

Noah’s Covenant with God

The Bible begins with a series of epic events through which the character of God is disclosed. As we read the first chapters of Genesis our modern minds try to work out the level of meaning of the text. We wonder if we are supposed to accept each detail as a factual account of how life began, and of the origin of the universe. These chapters are framing a *sacred history*, telling of God’s dealings with a particular people for a particular purpose. We’re reading a testimony which works on a different level from data. We’re reading an invitation to discover the answer to a fundamental question: Can I know God?

Around the people of Israel were a number of responses to that question. As they pondered the meaning of human existence the ancient Babylonians thought of crotchety and bad-tempered gods being in control, who needed to be placated and calmed down before they took vengeance; other civilisations imagined divine beings who were, by and

large, disinterested in the world they'd started off, and who needed to be woken from sleep in order to act in the interests of humans.

Israel, though, had a different experience. They caught a vision of God at work in ways that are purposeful and gracious – the One responsible for the universe and for our life. They came to recognise that far from capricious or irascible this God, the Lord of all creation on which all else is dependant, had made a passionate commitment to his people, and that he would remain faithful to that commitment whatever might come.

It's in order to describe this passionate commitment that we're given the story of Noah. It serves firstly as an indication of what happens when evil (all that opposes the loving purpose of God) is allowed to take hold. Genesis begins with a great act of creation in which the forces of chaos (represented by the sea) are pushed back to create the dry land upon which life can flourish. When sin gets in harmony is destroyed, the waters of chaos come flooding back and engulf nearly everything. The story of the flood is a picture of order crumbling into chaos, and is a sign of the judgement of God upon the misconduct of humans.

Yet, before the flood happens Noah is there, identified as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation”, and as one who “walked with God” (*Genesis 6.9*). So although the waters of chaos are unleashed and destruction obliterates most of the first creation, Noah and his family are commissioned to make a new beginning. The relationship of God with humans takes a new step, and what we hear in this first reading at Mass for the First Sunday of Lent is the establishing of a covenant, God's great ‘yes’ to his people – the story of salvation enters a new phase.

Poignantly, the rainbow is taken as a symbol of this covenant relationship. It shimmers in the sky as a sign that the murky weather is over and that the sun is breaking through. Chaos may sometimes come crashing in, the forces of destruction might do their worst, but there remains yet the sure hope of forgiveness and the support of God. We might just pause to reflect on the use of the rainbow as a symbol of hope over the last few months of the pandemic; deployed in gratitude for the sacrificial endeavours made by the NHS and other key workers, yes, but

also a symbol with deep roots in Scripture as the sign of God's enduring relationship with us.

Can I know God? Noah's story is the promise that God has irrevocably committed himself to his people. For Christians the waters of the flood are the sign of a further covenant, our being drawn into a relationship with God that is personal and passionate. They foreshadow the waters of baptism, and from the earliest days of the Church believers have reflected on the candidate for baptism being covered by the watery chaos so that something in them can be destroyed – the grip of sin and death – and something new can emerge – life with God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...” (*1 Peter 3. 20,21*)

The newly baptized Christian is sharing in God's creative work. The chaos of sin and death gives way through the graces of the sacrament to the possibility of life as God intends it. The Fourth Century Bishop of Jerusalem says of baptism “at the self-same moment, you died and you were reborn; and the water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother”. Our new birth as daughters and sons of God is the fruition of that covenant begun long ago in the promise to Noah, the experience of One we can not only know, but who is waiting for us to know him better.

For Reflection

- How are you discovering more about who God is?
- Have there been times when it felt like you were being overwhelmed by ‘the waters of chaos’? How did you experience God's promise in those times?
- What do you understand the word covenant to mean? Does your relationship with God feel like that?

Prayer

Lord of the heavens,
we bless your name for all your servants
who have been signs of your grace through the ages.
You delivered Noah from the waters of destruction;
you divided the waters of the sea,
and by the hand of Moses
you led your people from slavery into the Promised Land.
You made a new covenant in the blood of your Son,
that all who confess his name may, by the Holy Spirit,
enter the covenant of grace,
receive a pledge of the kingdom of heaven,
and share in the divine nature.
We thank you that in the waters of baptism we were reborn,
and rose from the grave to new life in Christ.
As the apostles and prophets, the confessors and martyrs,
faithfully served you in their generation,
may we be built into an eternal dwelling for you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit
be honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Common Worship: *Initiation Services*
Prayer over the Water in the season of All Saints (*adapt.*)

The Second Week of Lent

CAN I TRUST GOD'S PROMISES?

Genesis 22.1-2. 9-13. 15-18

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

God's promises to Abraham

For the Second Sunday of Lent the first reading always recalls the history of Abraham, who is such a formative character in the narrative of Israel. Abraham receives the promise of God that he will be the father of a great nation, and there is a call from God to him to leave his familiar territory. As a mark of significance of the task that he is set he receives a new name, and Abram becomes Abraham. This part of the epic

narrative at the opening of the Bible tells of the election of one man by God for the sake of the good of the whole earth, for he is to be the father of a great multitude, the People of God. No longer nomadic they will receive through him a homeland to call their own and, against all the odds, Abraham goes on trusting that what God is revealing and promising to him will come to pass.

That's one of the reasons why this passage from Genesis chapter twenty-two is on first hearing such a perplexing one. Isaac is Abraham's only son by his wife Sarah, he is the only chance that he has of continuing his line. More to the point, Isaac is how God himself has promised Abraham is going to become the father of a great nation. In asking for the sacrifice of Isaac it seems as if God is asking Abraham to make a nonsense of his own promise, and to destroy the possibility of that promise ever being fulfilled. The striking purpose of this passage is the way that Abraham goes on being prepared to follow the word of God. He's content to believe that the purpose of God is to be trusted, and that he can confidently leave the matter in his hands. We're being told through this incident something of the depth of trust and commitment that the covenant relationship with God requires, and the confidence that we can have in the promises that God is always making. Beyond all reason Abraham is willing to trust in God, and to let go of the security he has come to build his life on, simply because the One he loves is asking it of him. He walks as God's friend, and because of that his future is assured and his hand is stayed from offering Isaac up in sacrifice.

Pope Benedict notes the way in which Abraham is one of the great Biblical exemplars of faith, because he looks beyond outward appearance to trust in God's presence even when his paths seem dark or mysterious.

“What does this mean to us? When we affirm “I believe in God”, we are saying, like Abraham, “I trust in you, I entrust myself to you, O Lord”, but not as to Someone to turn to solely in times of difficulty or to whom to devote a few moments of the day or week. Saying “I believe in God” means founding my life on him, letting his Word guide it every

day, in practical decisions, without fear of losing some part of myself.”
General Audience, 13 January 2013

Alongside this lesson about friendship, trust and commitment there's something else going on here in the story of the development of Israel. It's hard for us to read this story of Abraham and Isaac because it's such an agonising one. There's such a drama in the way that the story is told as father and son walk together towards the place of sacrifice, and it seems as if there are two values at odds with each other which should never clash – Abraham's love as a father towards his son, and his love towards God. But there's something in our sensibilities which wasn't there when this part of Scripture was recorded. Israel was surrounded by civilisations that practised human sacrifice in order to appease and placate the capricious gods. There's an incident recorded in the Second book of Kings when the Israelites are so disgusted by the king of Moab sacrificing his eldest son to his gods on the walls of the city they are laying siege too that they walk away in outrage. (*2 Kings 3.27*) Maybe part of the purpose of this narrative is to describe why child sacrifice is displeasing to God – Abraham's hand is held back from killing Isaac, and the sacrifice is not desired. Did Abraham's confidence in God stretch to the conviction that he would never have to carry out the final stroke?

There is, though, a deeper purpose for us here as we read this story at this stage of our journey through Lent. Abraham's trust in God's purposes, even to the sacrifice of his son, is part of how God is preparing the way for Jesus. In these weeks it is as if we are walking with the eternal Father and his only Son towards the place of sacrifice. Jesus will complete the story that is begun here, for the sacrifice will be made, and out of love for us and obedience to the mission of his Father he will give up his life on the hill of Calvary. There is no last minute substitution of another victim, just the profound mystery that it looks as if the purpose and promise of God has been destroyed, only to discover that it is destroyed in order that it might be fully carried out. On the other side of his real, actual, physical death is the glory of the resurrection life through which he is present to us now.

For reflection:

- Has there ever been a time in your life when you have felt that you had to give something treasured up in order to follow a greater purpose? How did that feel?
- How do you understand sacrifice and what role does it play in your life?
- In what ways can the journey of faith sometimes feel dark or mysterious? What helps you trust?

Prayer

One of the liturgical gifts from the Methodist tradition is the Covenant Service, an annual event usually held at the start of the year to recall the solemn pledge of commitment to God's service, made in response to his faithful love. The following prayer forms a central part of that service:

Eternal God, in your faithful and enduring love
you call us to share in your gracious covenant in Jesus Christ.
In obedience we hear and accept your commands;
in love we seek to do your perfect will;
with joy we offer ourselves anew to you.
We are no longer our own but yours.

I am no longer my own but yours.
Your will, not mine, be done in all things,
wherever you may place me,
in all that I do and in all that I may endure;
when there is work for me and when there is none;
when I am troubled and when I am at peace.
Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded;
when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking;
when I have all things and when I have nothing.
I willingly offer all that I have and am
to serve you, as and where you choose.
Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever.
Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.

The Third Week of Lent

WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO?

Exodus 20.1-17

And God spoke all these words, saying,

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery. “You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

“You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.”

Becoming the People of God

As we make a Lenten journey through the history of God's People we reach on the Third Sunday his mighty servant Moses. Moses is instructed by God to head up the rescue mission that he intends, delivering Israel from the oppressive regime of Pharaoh. At first Moses is filled with apprehension, but with accompanying signs and wonders Israel passes through the Red Sea to on an exodus journey to freedom. The escaping Israelites are a large and petulant multitude, and rather than take a direct route to the territory that they will eventually inhabit they turn towards Mount Sinai, so that Moses can meet directly with God.

What happens on Mount Sinai is a formative experience for Israel, and here they are transformed from a gaggle of runaway slaves into the People of God. God is encountered in a rather terrifying and bewildering way at Sinai – Exodus describes it in terms of earthquakes, and thunder and lightning, powerful and disorienting. But what emerges are three gifts from God to re-order Israel. Firstly, he reminds them of the covenant relationship that he has with them, and of the faithful bond between them; secondly, he gives them a moral law by which they may know his purpose and be guided in ways that reflect his holiness; thirdly, he gives them a set of ritual practices through which they may express contrition for sin, thankfulness for mercy, and commitment to him as the true God rather than the other gods the nations around them worshipped.

So when we look at the Ten Commandments, as we do on this Sunday of Lent, it's always in the context of those three gifts that Israel receives at Sinai that we understand them. They are not some random set of instructions, seemingly designed to prevent us from doing what we'd like. Rather, they come as part of the way God is forming his people. They are (eventually) treasured by Israel because observing them is the way they can lovingly respond to God's loving choice of them, and because their own way of life can then reflect something of the holiness of God.

The Ten Commandments are, in the main, framed in the negative “thou shalt not”, but beneath the negative there is always a positive aspiration. So, when they tell us “you shall do no murder” there’s an obvious prohibition against killing someone, and that’s a basic foundation for any civilised society. Beneath the negative though is the positive, for not taking a life implies a commitment to life itself – in all its forms. Or we might think of the negative “you shall not commit adultery”. Again, this a basic way of preventing society falling into chaos, but there’s a deeper ‘positive’ there; adultery is the moment a marriage is breaking down, so this is an encouragement to couples to think of the other more than the self, and to live one life as one flesh. The commandments tell us “not to bear false witness”, because telling lies about others can never be the foundation of justice. But this is also a reminder to be truthful in all forms of communication.

In his book ‘What is the point of being a Christian?’ Timothy Radcliffe observes that, properly understood the commandments teach us about freedom, because they help us remember who we really are – people made in God’s own image to reflect his holiness. He writes:

“The Ten Commandments are not an external constraint on our freedom: they tell us who we are. If I feel myself being carried away by a sudden desire to murder the Prior, then ‘Thou shalt not kill’ reminds me that I am his brother, and that I do not really want to kill him, much.”
What is the Point of Being a Christian” (Continuum, 2005) p43

In receiving the Ten Commandments at Sinai the Israelites discover that, with God, they can build a community without fear, rivalry or anxiety. They are given an invitation to a deeper form of friendship – becoming the people with whom God dwells in a particular way. This, too, is part of how God is preparing the way for Jesus and the Church that he establishes as the new People of God. Our way of life is our loving response to God’s loving commitment, and our call to follow the commandments an invitation: if you want to grow in love, then this is how.

For reflection

- Sinai was a key moment in how Israel came to understand itself. What are the key moments in your own life that have shaped who you are and how you think about yourself?
- Do you think the Church conveys the positive aspect of the commandments? If not, how could we be a more effective witness?
- How do you think the way your parish community practises the faith appears to other people?

Prayer

Almighty God,
who alone can bring order
to the unruly wills and passions of sinful humanity:
give your people grace
so to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
that, among the many changes of this world,
our hearts may surely there be fixed
where true joys are to be found;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Common Worship: *Collect for the Third Sunday before Lent*

The Fourth Week of Lent

WHERE IS GOD WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

2 Chronicles 16.14-16, 19-23

All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the Lord that he had made holy in Jerusalem. The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

Their enemies burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.””

Israel in Exile

For this Fourth Sunday of Lent the Old Testament reading recalls the lowest point in the story of Israel. The disaster that befell them was not entirely unexpected, and for generations the prophets had been warning the people that unless they amended their behaviour a tragedy on an epic scale would arrive. Heedless Israel had come to regard God's

covenant relationship with them as rendering them immune to his judgement. On their part they consistently failed to keep the promises that they had made towards God, failing to act with the holiness, righteousness and integrity that he had asked of them. The exile that follows is regarded as the chastisement for their unfaithfulness, a visible manifestation of the sin which was at Israel's heart.

Politically, the situation that is referred to in this passage from the Second Book of Chronicles is an extremely complicated one. The Israelites had formed into two kingdoms, both wayward, both continually called by the prophets to remember that they had been formed for friendship with God, and to carry forward God's purposes for all peoples. Around them the great empires of Assyria and Babylon were flexing their military and political muscles. In the 'northern' of the two kingdoms the prophet Isaiah sought to calm the tense situation by telling its king, Ahaz, to trust in God's care of them. Double dealing on the part of Ahaz sounded this kingdom's death knell. Assyria invaded, the people were deported, and the land colonised by Syrians and Babylonians. The 'southern' kingdom fared no better, and in many ways their heedlessness of the covenant relationship with God seems to have been worse. When Babylon overtook Assyria as the major military power they invaded, laid siege to Jerusalem, destroyed its fortifications and Solomon's magnificent temple was burned to the ground.

The Babylonian captivity lasted for around fifty years. In around 559 BC Cyrus ascended to the throne of the nearby Persian kingdom. It was into his hands that the Babylonian super-power fell, and almost immediately he issued two decrees, authorising the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland and allowing them to rebuild the temple and re-establish worship there. What Second Chronicles records is the very different policy of Persia from Babylon and Assyria, for whereas they had suppressed the worship and religious cult of Israel, Cyrus actively permitted it.

It was, as I say, a complicated and changing political map, but the exile was a shattering experience for proud and confident Israel. What was particularly hard for them was their separation from the practice of their faith, and they felt spiritually lost without the temple or sacrifice. They

do seem to have had the opportunity though to reflect on the age old questions: where is God when disaster befalls us? Do his promises to be faithful still hold true even in the midst of tragedy? Is it possible to still know his presence even when our very practice of religious faith is stripped away from us? It's not so much that Israel wondered what they had done to deserve such a tragedy, but how could they hold on to the sense of God's faithfulness in the midst of it.

Two insights emerged from the dark days of exile through which we can still understand our own bewildering periods of suffering and difficulty. The first was that through all their periods of trauma God had not abandoned them. They might have broken the covenant bond with him, but he was still their God who could never leave his people. That's the message of the prophets who continue to speak the word of God to them, and who add visions of hope to their warnings of judgement.

The second insight was that God had taken the initiative to bring them from a place of hopelessness to the land of promise. He had called Abraham from his nomadic existence in Mesopotamia to found a nation, he had called Israel out of Egypt and their slavery, and now he called them out of exile as captives in Babylon. Through humiliation and disaster they had survived because of the saving intervention of God – and so hope was rekindled that greater things would be in store for them.

These two insights are, again, part of how God is preparing the way for Jesus. His life is the ultimate way by which God is present with his people, and he leads us out from a captivity even greater than that in Babylon, for he goes before us to lead us from the exile of sin and death to the glorious freedom of the Kingdom of God. Our Lenten journey is carrying us forward to the celebration that brings light to the darkness in which we live.

For reflection:

- What place does judgement have in your understanding of faith?
- How do you think this period of the history of Israel prepares the way for the ministry of Jesus?
- Have there been times in the last few months when you've felt cut off from the practise of your faith? How did you think about God's presence with you in those times?

Prayer

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.

As for our lyres, we hung them up
on the willows that grow in that land.

For there our captors asked for a song,
our tormentors called for mirth:

'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'

How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a strange land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget its skill.

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I set not Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Psalm 137.1-6

God of our pilgrimage,
you sent your Son to our strange land
to bring us home to you;
give us your songs to sing,
that even in our exile
we may be filled with the breath of the Spirit
of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Common Worship: *Daily Prayer*

The Fifth Week of Lent

HOW CAN I HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Jeremiah 31.31-34

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares 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. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Establishing the New Covenant

In many ways this passage from the prophet Jeremiah feels like a climax in the history of Israel that we’ve been following over the last few weeks. We’ve charted the progress of a covenant relationship with God from Noah to Abraham, to Moses and to the disastrous falling away that ended in the exile. In Babylon the Israelites experience the loss of everything except the faithful commitment of God to them. Moreover, they realise that they can even know God’s presence in their lives when they are away from the familiar territory of Israel. It’s as if something shifts, and they grasp that the covenant with God is more than tribal loyalty, but that it has at its heart a personal commitment to the God who is present in all times and all places.

From the disaster of exile a new hope emerges, a hope that is far deeper than some vaguely optimistic notion that ‘everything will turn out alright in the end’, but which is based on the saving will of God. This is the hope of the “new covenant” of which Jeremiah speaks, a relationship with God that isn’t built of the fragile and wavering commitments of humans, but which is written ‘indestructibly’ in our hearts.

We're at the point of Lent when we're turning towards the events of the Passion in a more focused and intense way, and what we see in the death and resurrection of Jesus is that he is the one who establishes this 'new covenant' with God for us. In his book on the events of Holy Week the Pope Emeritus comments on how the renewal of the covenant spoken of by Jeremiah is accomplished by the life, death and glorification of Christ:

“The New Covenant must be founded on an obedience that is irrevocable and inviolable. This obedience, now located at the very root of human nature, is the obedience of the Son, who made himself a servant and took all human disobedience on himself in his obedience even unto death, suffered it right to the end, and conquered it.”

Pope Benedict *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week* (Catholic Truth Society, 2011) p132

Standing on this far side of the cross and resurrection we can see that we can have a relationship with God because of Jesus, truly God and truly man. As man he stands in our place to perfectly fulfil the will of the Father, as God he confronts the reality of sin and evil himself. The audacious claim of the Christian is that we stand 'in Christ'. One with him we share his relationship with the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the 'new covenant written in human hearts'. He has shared our human life to make us sharers of his divine life – a people caught up in the covenant-love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

One of the things that makes the world of difference to is what we think is going on when we pray. Because of the new covenant we are to talk to God in the same way that Jesus does, as our Father, so, as one writer describes it, when we pray the 'Our Father' we are expressing the confidence that we stand with Jesus and that there's a kind of conversation going on. Through the Holy Spirit working in us Jesus is taking our prayer to the Father.

The Third Century theologian Origen wrote a book about the Lord's Prayer in which he observed that because of the 'new covenant' made in the life of Jesus we can be sure that God is our friend who draws us as close to him as we could imagine. He's made us part of his family and so we always pray on that basis. We pray *in* Jesus who takes us "to the

throne of godhead, to the Father's breast", and so as we do that more and more of the life of Jesus grows in our lives.

C.S. Lewis, in a series of radio talks once spoke of the way in which he believed that there was more truth in the old fairy stories than we might suppose. He reminded his listeners of the story of Beauty and the Beast, where the monster is kissed and if he were a man to break the spell which kept him like that. Then Lewis went on to talk of a similar tale, where an unpleasant and angry character wears a mask to give him the appearance of being kinder than he is – and because those who encounter him treat him like the kind person he appears to be his personality changes, and what has begun as a disguise becomes his reality.

Something similar happens with us when we pray, C.S. Lewis went on to say. We're calling God 'Father', we're taking on the intimacy with God that Jesus did. As we do that Christ, the true Son of God, is at our side, turning the pretence into a reality, forming his own image within us. To be baptised into the new covenant and to receive it into our bodies in the sacrament is to grow into the likeness of Christ, as servants of the covenant-love.

This love has been planted into our hearts, but it depends on the unshakable faithfulness of the One we are now following to cross, grave and resurrection garden, and it is this love in us which will always have the last word.

For reflection:

- In what ways does the idea of Jesus' perfect obedience inspire you? What's the hardest decision that you've had to make in obedience to God?
- 'Praying the Our Father is about standing in the place of Jesus'. How does that idea help you think about what is happening when you pray?

Prayer

Almighty God,
who wonderfully created us in your own image
and yet more wonderfully restored us
through your Son Jesus Christ:
grant that, as he came to share in our humanity,
so we may share the life of his divinity;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Common Worship: *Collect for the Sunday after Christmas*

The text of this booklet is written by Fr Philip Barnes for the See of Fulham and The Society, whose work is supported by Forward in Faith.

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