

The New Covenant Promise

Homily for January 20th 2017

As we pick up our reading from Hebrews today the writer carries on from where he left off yesterday. Just as he pointed out how imperfections in the old priestly order required the inauguration of a new order, he now matches that claim with a similar word about how defects in the old covenant made a new covenant necessary.

When Hebrews speaks of the “first covenant,” it means the covenant made between God and Israel at Sinai. After God gave the law through Moses, the people made a solemn vow: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” Then, as a sign of the covenant, Moses dashed the blood of sacrificed oxen on the people and declared,

“See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (see Exod. 24:7–8).

The bad news about the old covenant is that the people broke faith and violated their promises. The first covenant was not an equal affair—God was God, and the people were people—but it was, nonetheless, a two-way arrangement. If the people would hold on firmly to their end of the rope, then God promised to hold on to the other and to pull them to a place of safety and rest. The people vowed that they would, indeed, hold on, but they quickly grew weary and let go. They swore obedience, but, like all human beings, they wavered, buckled, and finally fell. No law could make them obey; no ox blood could strengthen their resolve.

The good news, however, is that God did not let go of the rope. The people could not keep faith, but God does. Hebrew’s message is that, since the first covenant was not effective, God mercifully makes a better covenant. Because human sin is chronic and tenacious, the old covenant led to a cycle of defeat and despair.

In Saul Bellow’s novel *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Sammler prays for the soul of his good friend, who has just died:

Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, as willingly as possible and as well as he was able, and even to an intolerable point, and even in suffocation and even as death was coming was eager ... to do what was required of him.... He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, we know, we know (p. 313).

Hebrews though, knows that in the deepest sense none of us is able to “meet the terms of our contract,” none of us keeps our holy obligations. Every day we, and the rest of the human race, look into the mirror and know, in our heart of hearts, that we are not living up to our end of any

covenant based on obedience to the law. So God established a “new covenant,” this time one based on mercy and forgiveness.

The language of “new covenant” comes, of course, from the prophet Jeremiah, specifically Jeremiah 31:31–34, and Hebrews now proceeds to quote that text at length. This quotation serves two purposes. Since it describes the failure of Israel “to continue in my covenant” (8:9), it serves as evidence for Hebrew’s claim that God found fault with the people and institutions of the first covenant (8:8). It also, however, signifies the transition to the second covenant and names some of the marks of this new covenant, which will be developed in more detail in chapters 9 and 10. In contrast to the first covenant, the new covenant is an inward reality. The laws of the new covenant are not on the books; they are written on the minds and hearts of the people (8:10). In the new covenant, people do not approach an unknown God; rather, “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (8:11). We are not like lost children knocking fearfully on the house of a stranger, but like sons and daughters walking confidently up the path to our own home. Moreover, the new covenant is a bond based on the promise of mercy and forgiveness (8:12); the endless curse of the first covenant, the ceaseless condemnation of never measuring up, of never being worthy, is wiped away in a single gesture of divine kindness and grace.

It is this theme that we pick up on in the psalm where we prayed:

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

In Jesus, God no longer remains outside of our world but comes inside. Similarly the Blood of the New Covenant is not sprinkled on the outside of our bodies. Instead we take the Blood of the merciful Lamb into the sinews and fibers of our bodies so that in the words of Jeremiah:

I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts.

Such is the beauty of superiority of the New Covenant, a Covenant we receive in every Eucharist.