

Second Sunday after Easter

April 18, 2010

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XXXI
THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT
(Exodus 24)

Four weeks ago, on the Sunday preceding Palm Sunday, we completed our reflections on the Ten Commandments. We labeled them ‘the Covenant Words’ because they were the Ten Words (in Latin: Decalogue) which God spoke to the children of Israel from the fire and smoke of Mount Sinai as part of the ceremony by which he bound them to himself in sacred covenant, pledging that he would be their God and that they would be his people, his peculiar people, his particular treasure, a holy nation, a kingdom of priests. A solemn ceremony it was, one that began in Exodus chapter 19 when this people, whom God delivered from Egyptian slavery and brought to himself on eagles’ wings, gathered in solemn assembly at the foot of Mount Sinai after three days of careful preparation. There the fireworks began and God spoke the Ten Words recorded in Exodus 20. Others words followed, which are set forth in the remainder of chapter 20 and in the three that follow, further instructions known as the Book of the Covenant, laws concerning slaves and violence, property and justice, the sabbatical year and annual festivals. The Book of the Covenant concludes with the promise that God will bring Israel to the land of Canaan and give them victory over its inhabitants, to which is appended the warning: “You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you” (23:32-33).

What follows in chapter 24 is of the utmost importance and absolutely critical to our understanding not only of God’s relationship to Israel in the Old Covenant but also of his relationship to the Church in the New. It begins with God’s instructions to Moses. “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship afar off. Moses alone shall come near to the Lord; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him” (24:1-2). If we were reading this text in Hebrew none of us could understand it, of course. But if we could, and if we were familiar with the rest of the Torah, the Pentateuch, in Hebrew, our ears would pick up a resonance of tone, or distinctive similarities,

with the account in Genesis chapter 22 of Abraham's offering up of Isaac.¹ As Abraham approached Mount Mariah, he looked up and saw the place "afar off", and commanded his attendants to remain there while he proceeded up the mountain alone, with Isaac by his side. Moses uses Abraham's exact words when he tells those with him, "Sit here . . . We will come back to you." Both accounts employ the same word for worship ("to bow down"), a similar set of connective words, and involve a sacrifice, a burnt offering. Both occur on a mountain, albeit different mountains. Mt. Mariah is traditionally identified as what became known as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the symbolism of which is powerful. We can skip ahead, we who know Holy Scripture, to another mount, smaller but more significant still, this one not in Jerusalem but outside the gates, Golgotha it is called, and One who proceeded there by himself, alone in reality, to offer sacrifice.

But we're getting ahead of the story. After the opening introduction to Exodus 24, Moses goes down to the people, tells them "all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances," and the people answer as with one voice, "All the words which the Lord has spoken, we will do" (24:3). This is the same pledge they had given in chapter 19 before the Lord spoke his words from the Mount (19:8). Then Moses, rising early in the morning, builds an altar in front of the mountain and twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. He then sends young men to offer to the Lord burnt offerings and peace offerings of oxen. Burnt offerings are directed to God in worship; peace offerings are offerings of atonement for the sins of the people. As George A.F. Knight put it, "The burnt-offering was for the praise of God; the peace offering was for fellowship with him."² The offerings, therefore, had a two-fold aspect, God-ward and man-ward. The blood from the oxen that were slain was drained from their bodies before they were offered up. Moses took half of that blood and put it into basins. The other half he threw against the altar. He then took the Book of the Covenant, the laws that are set forth in the preceding chapters of Exodus, and read it aloud in the hearing of the people. Then, once more, a third time, the people pledged their obedience: "All the words which the Lord has spoken, we will do" (24:7). Thereupon Moses took the half of the blood he had put into basins and threw it on the people, saying, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (24:8).

¹ For what follows see Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, p. 252.

² *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 157.

It is hard for me to imagine a more dramatic scene for the sealing of the covenant, or clearer, more powerful symbolism. The making of the covenant that began in chapter 20 when “God spoke all these words,” the Ten and the others that followed, concluding with the promise of the land, and that was answered by the thrice-affirmed pledge of the people, is now sealed with blood, the same blood of the sacrificed oxen thrown both upon God’s altar and upon God’s people. He, the one and only God, would be their God and they would be his people, his alone and his totally. God said, “I will,” and the people said, “We do,” and the blood sealed their mutual pledge, Moses declaring, “Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

And we today whom God has also chosen to be his people think naturally of our Lord in the Upper Room with the twelve as he prepares to go alone to sacrifice, pouring the wine in the chalice and giving it to the disciples, saying, “This is my blood of the *new* covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the remissions of sins.” And before that day was over, a Jewish day which continued until the following sunset, his blood was poured out as a sacrifice to God in the truest worship, and as a peace offering to take away the sin of the world. And every time we eat this bread and drink this cup the same blood that was flung against the altar of the cross is applied to us as well, binding us to God in a new and everlasting covenant.

There is so much else in this 24th chapter of the Book of Exodus that we could dwell upon with profit. We have left the entire latter half of the chapter untouched, but before we move on next week to the chapter that follows and something of a change of subject, I want to stress that the covenant of God has two sides, God’s and ours. In Holy Week and the Easter Octave that followed, we reviewed once again the wonder of God’s love for us in Christ, literally poured out in his blood. But the other side of the covenant points to the responsibility that is ours. Now it is true that Jesus Christ, having assumed our flesh, perfectly fulfilled the human side of the covenant, but not in any such way as to make less incumbent upon us the same vow of obedience that the children of Israel affirmed three times over: “All that the Lord has spoken unto us we will do.”

The third time they took this pledge there was an addition. In the R.S.V. it is translated, “All that the Lord has spoken unto us we will do, *and we will be obedient.*” The Hebrew, however, says, “All that the Lord has spoken unto us we will do, *and we will hear.*” Now, ‘hearing’ in this case obvious includes obedience, as when a father says to his teenage daughter, “Listen to your mother,” but it seems strange that the words should appear in this order. We should expect ‘listening’ to precede ‘obedience.’ First, you hear and then, you do. “What the Lord is saying to us, we will listen to and obey.” But that is not what the text says. ‘Obey’ is first, for the commandments of the Lord require our immediate and unquestioning obedience. That obedience is what Israel vowed in all three instances. But now in this third pledge, to ‘obedience’ there is added ‘hearing.’ Even after obedience, or the partial obedience for which we often settle, it is required that we listen. Even if you fulfilled the commandments perfectly, it is necessary beyond that to listen. Indeed, listening must be our fundamental attitude of spirit, especially in relation to the God who manifests himself primarily through words and through the Word. It is not incidental that the ancient creed of Israel began with the word, “Hear.” “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4). Abraham obeyed God in that testing (that testing that we will never fully comprehend) and offered up Isaac, but he continued to listen and God spoke another word. James Plastaras wrote, “The Church of the new covenant, like Israel of the old covenant, has need of certain concrete laws and prescriptions, but these laws, which are valid but incomplete expressions of God’s will for the holiness of his people, are not enough. There must be complete openness to his will as it will be revealed in the course of events,”³ and, I would add, in an ever deepening understanding of his word.

We must be ever listening for the word of God. Jesus said repeatedly, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” The Jewish theologian, Michael Fishbane, speaks of “sacred attunement,” of being attuned to God through his word.⁴ We must listen because truth comes from beyond, from God, not from us. We must listen because we are apt by nature to think that we already know, that we have fully grasped, that we have no further need. The ones who in humility always acknowledge their need of God, of his guidance and of his love, those whom our Lord called ‘the poor in spirit,’ will be ever attentive to God in the works of creation, in the words of Scripture, in the actions of the sacraments, in the voice of the saints, and in the face of their

³ *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives*, p. 227.

⁴ *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008)

fellow-man, especially those in dire circumstance or with special needs in whom we see the face of Christ. God has spoken to us in the words of Mount Sinai and in the Word which is his Son. May we ever respond, “All that the Lord has spoken unto us we will do, and we will hear.”

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Second Sunday after Easter, April 18, 2010. Copyright © 2010.