

28th January 2024 – Isaiah 40-55 (3) – Isaiah 49:1-12 ‘A new covenant’

Our theme today is A New Covenant. Now if we're going to talk about a new covenant, that presupposes that there was an old covenant. And what is a covenant anyway? Well, today, it's a term used in legal documents to denote a binding agreement between two parties, with obligations on both sides.

In the Bible Covenant has a very specific meaning, because one of the parties to the covenant is God himself, and God is the initiator of the covenant.

In the beginning God makes an implicit covenant with Adam and Eve: he gives them a beautiful world, an easy life in a garden, the authority to name all the animals. There is just one condition attached to all this: they must not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Well, we all know how that turned out. Just one thing was asked of them, and they couldn't do it, and so there were consequences.

But God is amazingly patient, and so, after many years, when these human beings that he has created are going from bad to worse, God curbs his instinct to destroy the whole lot of them, because he finds one good man, Noah ... described in Genesis as *'a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.'*

The story of Noah's Ark is probably one of the first Bible stories many of us learned as children. It ends with the covenant God makes with Noah and his family: God promises never again to destroy the earth, and it is sealed with a sign, a reminder of the covenant: the rainbow, the rainbow that appears as the rain ceases and the sun comes out.

¹ 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.", "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."

But there are two sides to this covenant, including food laws and rules about human behaviour. The passage ends with the same instruction God gave to Adam and Eve: *"⁷As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."*

This feels like a new beginning, a chance to start again. A covenant is an agreement between two parties, remember. And God kept his part of the agreement, but, human beings being what they are, things again go wrong pretty quickly.

However, we have a God who does not give up on his creation. He calls Abraham. Abraham has a long journey, both literally and metaphorically, but, even though he and his wife are both old and childless, God makes another covenant through him, with the Jewish nation that he promises will one day exist as descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Of course, Sarah laughs when she hears about this, because she is long past her child-bearing years, or so she thinks. But God keeps his promise, and Abraham and the Jewish nation are expected to keep theirs.

This covenant is marked with another sign, not quite as pretty as the rainbow this time. Circumcision is introduced as the mark that the Jews are God's people, a reminder of their side of the covenant. Although this covenant is initially made with the Jewish people, it doesn't end there: they have a special calling... God has promised Abraham that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through them.

But, predictably, things go wrong again during the history of the Jewish nation, and God has to save them yet again. This time he chooses Moses, to bring them out of captivity in Egypt.

Here the sign is the eating of unleavened bread and the sacrifice of a lamb. The daubing of its blood on the doorposts also has a practical purpose, and so the Israelites are spared the deaths that God visits on their captors. And what does God require of them, as their side of the covenant?

It begins with the Ten Commandments, but by the time of Jesus, the law has ballooned into hundreds of additional regulations, and its original purpose has been largely lost.

And so, God proposes another covenant. But this one is different from all the others.

It is still a covenant initiated by God, and like the others, it has a sign as a reminder. Patterned on the yearly keeping of the Passover, the sacrificial lamb this time is God himself, in Jesus. The unleavened bread and blood of the Passover are replaced by the body and blood of Jesus.

Perhaps it's worth saying that some of the hymns we sing sometimes refer to the blood of the lamb - or even say that we are washed by the blood of the lamb, which on the surface doesn't sound very practical as an image for getting things clean; but for the Jewish nation, of course, the sacrifice of a lamb was a means of cleansing from sin. With the sacrifice of Jesus, there was no longer any need for the ritual sacrifice of animals.

At the last supper, Jesus says: *This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you...* And we acknowledge the sign of that covenant every time we celebrate Holy Communion.

Unlike the old covenants, this one is completely one-sided. It is unconditional. Jesus offers himself freely and at great cost, the greatest possible cost, for the forgiveness of sins. He frees us to be once more in relationship with the God who made us and who made all creation, in the beginning.

And we can look back from the time of Jesus to this passage in Isaiah as a hint of God's intentions. The original readers of our passage would probably have related it to their immediate situation, in the aftermath of exile and destruction:

In the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'

But this new covenant is not just for the descendants of Abraham. God's promise that all the nations on earth would be blessed through Abraham will be fulfilled. The writer couldn't have known just how or when, but he does make it clear that this covenant is intended for all people: *I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*, and this is the verse echoed by Simeon in Luke's Gospel after the birth of Jesus. Like the other Old Testament prophets, Isaiah was clearly a person of great insight and vision, and above all of faith. He knew something important about the nature of God, and it is expressed joyously in this passage. He knew about God's loving purpose for his people, and he trusted entirely in God. And, because of the new covenant, we can do the same.

We have looked at quite a bit of Biblical history today. The new covenant is not a piece of history, but a living thing; it lives in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. It is made once for all. As people of the new covenant, we are blessed to know the nature of God through the Incarnation: God seen in the face of a human being who lived like us. We know that salvation has come.

Lord of our life; God of our salvation; hope of all the nations, may we know in our hearts the meaning of your salvation, and may that knowledge shine forth in our lives. Amen.