

2nd Sunday of Lent – Feb. 28, 2010

Reading I [Gn 15:5-12, 17-18](#)

Responsorial Psalm [Ps 27:1, 7-8, 8-9, 13-14.](#)

The Lord is my light and my salvation

Reading II [Phil 3:17—4:1 or 3:20—4:1](#)

Gospel [Lk 9:28b-36](#)

Homily by Fr. Ronald Nelson

I would like to entitle this Homily: “Renewing the Covenant,” because that is really what lent is all about.

Whenever I think of the covenant, the image that comes to mind is that beautiful image on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in Rome at the Vatican.

On the ceiling is depicted the “Creation of Adam.” You can see God the Father reaching and stretching out to touch the finger of Adam. Then Adam, has his elbow on his knee and he half heartedly sticking out his finger, barely even making an effort. What is not immediately apparent is that their fingers are not actually touching. There is about ½ inch between their fingers.

I had a teacher named professor Habets, and he said that that space between the fingers of God and Adam is the space for the covenant. The covenant is what bridges that gap.

It is clear that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of that covenant. It is Jesus Christ that bridges that infinite gap between God and Man.

St. Paul reminds us that our citizen ship is heaven... but we cannot enter there without our Savior, without entering into that covenantal relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

You see throughout all of salvation history, God has made covenants with humanity: We remember one of the first covenants that God made was with Noah and the rest of creation. After the 40 days and 40 nights in which God flooded the earth and shot his arrows of lightning bolts, he lays down his bow of war. He ceases his war with humanity and the rest of creation. And often after a thunderstorm, we see God's bow of war (the rainbow) laid down on its side, reminding us that God will never destroy the earth by water. And so that rainbow becomes the sign of the covenant.

Then we have the covenant with Abram in Genesis 15. The Lord promises him land. And to prove his faithfulness to the covenant the Lord has Abram bring sacrificial animals, cut them in half, and lay the pieces opposite each other.

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. 17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land...

To understand this covenant ritual you need a little bit of background. In the ancient world when men made a covenant between themselves, they would take some sacrificial animal and they would perform a hypothetical self curse. They would slaughter the animals, cut them in half, and then they would walk between the pieces. This signified that if I don't keep my end of this covenant, may I be like these slaughtered animals.

So when the sun went down and this deep sleep fell on Abram, God participated in this covenant – my teacher called this ritual a hypothetical self-curse. That smoking fire pot and the flaming torch that passed between those pieces represents God. God participates in this ritual and it is as if he is saying, "if this covenant is not fulfilled, may I be torn apart like these animals." And so the sign of this covenant is the sacrificial animals and the torch and the smoking fire pot.

Can you imagine if the marriage covenant was carried out in this way? May I be torn apart like these animals if I don't keep up my end of the covenant; it is a matter of life and death. But that is the kind of attitude that we need to have when we enter into a covenant.

As we continue with the history of God's covenants with humanity, we come to the point where God makes another covenant with Abraham... that he will make his descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky. God makes this promise when Abraham shows that he is willing to sacrifice his own son Isaac. The continued life of Isaac, and the ram that was sacrificed in his place become the signs of the covenant.

So we see that blood and sacrifice is associated with covenants, because blood is sacred, because it is the very source of our life.

Again with Moses we find this covenantal relationship. In Exodus 24, Moses, takes half the blood from sacrificed animals and sprinkles the altar of sacrifice, and he takes the other half of the blood and sprinkles the people, after they respond that "all that the Lord has said, we will heed and do." After this is done, and the altar and all people are purified. The Lord God appears to the people. And it says in Exodus that the Lord (Exodus 24:11) ... did not smite these chosen Israelites. After gazing on God, they could still eat and drink."

Notice that they have a meal – they see God and they have a meal. And so the symbols are the blood or the sacrifice and meal.

Immediately after this God calls Moses to go up mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights. And God promises that he will dwell with his people – when they build him a sanctuary.

And God says, (Exodus 19:5-6) Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites."

Yet covenant after covenant we fail to remain faithful, but God always sticks around, God is always faithful. This continues for centuries until

we get to the new and everlasting covenant, Jesus Christ. The covenant that fulfills all of the previous covenants. And that is precisely what we are celebrating at Mass today.

Remember in Luke's Gospel we read (22:19-20) [that Jesus] took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to [his disciples], saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.

And we know what happened after the last supper; Jesus is crucified and dies. He is torn apart; he is treated as a sacrificial animal. His blood is sprinkled in a sense ... it drips all over the streets of Jerusalem until he climbs the hill of Calvary (the place of the skull) where he is nailed to the cross and suspended between heaven and earth. Mediating between Man and God. It is as if that hypothetical self curse of God with Abraham is fulfilled... "may I be torn apart, like these sacrificial animals if I do not keep the covenant." But God was never unfaithful to the covenant, (it we who were unfaithful) but in order to show His faithfulness... indeed in order to fulfill the covenant, the God-man becomes the sacrificial offering. In fact, the God-man fulfills both parts of the covenant, because we were unable to fulfill our part. As God, Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise to Moses: "I will dwell with my people". And as man, he takes on our part, and is the one who is wholly and truly faithful to God. And as St. Peter reminds us today: [through that suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus makes possible that "appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God"

It is impossible for us to fully plumb the depths of the Mass; but this sacrificial aspect is part of what we are celebrating today. That one-time eternal sacrifice of our Lord on the cross is made present to us. And we have a sacramental re-presentation of that sacrifice. An unbloody sacrifice in which the bread and wine are consecrated separately: showing us/ reminding us/ reenacting for us/ making present for us/ that sacrifice on Calvary.

And rather than eating the flesh of the sacrificial animal... and rather than being sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificial animal, we consume the body and blood of the God-man.

Use these 40 days of lent wisely... and I would recommend that each time you come up for communion, recognize that you are renewing your participation in the covenant with the Lord, just as surely as if Moses were here sprinkling you with the blood of sacrificial animals. When you come up for communion and you hear the words, "The body of Christ; the blood of Christ." Let your "Amen" be an echo the words of the Israelites to Moses: "All that the Lord has said we will heed and do." And what does the Lord say? "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."