

01 Sunday of Lent
March 1, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

Covenant Response

Genesis 9:8-15
Psalm 25
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15

Responses are part of life. There's the "reply" button on e-mail, RSVP requirements on invitations, "call back" numbers on cell phones, etc. Life is full of invitations to respond, including spiritual responses to covenants.

Covenants are spoken of often in Sacred Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. They represent a two-sided agreement. On the one side, God made promises to individuals or groups of people. On the other side, the people agreed to respond in a particular way. Unlike contracts, which are usually concerned with one's own interest, covenants were and are concerned with the other person's best interest.

Our first reading and responsorial psalm both used the word "covenant" repeatedly. The former spoke of the covenant between God and Noah. This is the first covenant explicitly spoken of in Sacred Scripture. It is special because it is unlike any of the other covenants from God until the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. The singularity of the Noahic Covenant comes in the fact that it represents an agreement between God and *all of humanity* and even all of creation. God promised that, "Never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood" (Genesis 9:11). Future covenants were between God and particular individuals or groups, not all of humanity.

Like all covenants, the Noahic Covenant demanded a response from humanity. Their responsibility, as outlined by God, was to populate the earth (9:1), be stewards of creation (9:2-3), eat cooked meat (9:4), refrain from murder (9:5), and exact revenge for murder (9:6).

The Old Testament covenants that followed the Noahic Covenant include God's promises to Abraham, Lot, Jacob, the Israelites, and King David. While the author of the Book of Psalms was not actually David, it is presumed that our Psalm today, Psalm 25, is speaking about the Davidic Covenant. Already in the book of Psalms, however, we see a shift from David to something new; something referred to by Biblical scholars as the "New Covenant."

While the New Covenant spoken about in the Old Testament has never been a significant feature of Judaism, it has been a *very* significant feature of Christianity. As Christians, we believe that the prophets who spoke about a new covenant that was coming were speaking about the future Messiah, Jesus Christ. Such prophecies would include:

I will make a covenant for them on that day.... I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the LORD.

-Hosea 2:20a, 21-22

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

-Jeremiah 31:31-33

Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days; through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear. Therefore I will give him his portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty, because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.

-Isaiah 53:11-12

Jesus, Himself, testified to the fact that He is the New Covenant when He said at the Last Supper, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25). As with the old covenants, this New Covenant in the Blood of Christ requires a response from us. On one level, Jesus tells us what that response should be when He says, "Do this in remembrance of me." However, in addition to remembering His sacrifice and covenant through our celebration of the Eucharist, each of us is invited in unique and personal ways to respond to God's covenant love.

Ideally, our Lenten penances, sacrifices and acts of charity are part of our response to God's Covenant love in Christ. I invite us this week to think about God's covenant love for us and assess whether what we have decided to do (or not do) during Lent reflects a response to His profound love.