

May 16, 2004

Sunday of the Man Born Blind

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Arguably the most important component of the Bible's Flood story is the Lord's covenant with Noah. Indeed, it is in respect to Noah that the expression "covenant" (*b'rith*) first appears in Holy Scripture. This theme of covenant is found, furthermore, at both the beginning (Genesis 6:18) and the end (9:9-17) of the Flood narrative.

Especially striking in this story are three resemblances between the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) and the Bible's second account of the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17). First, both of these covenants are portrayed as established gifts, or endowments. Second, both of the covenants remain God's own property. Third, each of these two covenants is marked by a specific sign, which is called "the sign of the covenant." Let us look at these three features in turn.

First, with respect to the covenant as an established gift, or endowment, we observe that the verbs employed in each case are *natan*, "to give" (Genesis 9:12; 17:2), and *haqim*, "to establish" (9:9,11; 17:7). The first of these verbs, "give," emphasizes the generosity of God's act in making the covenant; it is pure, unmerited grace. The second verb, "establish," places the accent on God's steadfast resolve. The covenant is perpetually established; it is "everlasting" (9:16; 17:7). God will never break it. In the covenants with Noah and Abraham, then, there is an infallible pledge of perpetual hope. That is to say, both covenants are permanent endowments freely bestowed.

To appreciate the significance of this perspective, it is useful to contrast these two chapters of Genesis with other covenant stories in Holy Scripture. Most of the Bible's covenant accounts employ the Hebrew verb *karath*, which literally means "to cut." Although this idiom is usually disguised in English translations ("to make a covenant"), the actual Hebrew expression says "to cut a covenant." In context this verb conveys the sense of an arrangement, as it were, a distribution between partners (with attention to the first syllable of that word). Even English has a

similar idiom, as when we say "cut me in" to mean "make me a participant."

That Hebrew idiom was not exclusively, nor even originally, religious. In fact, both the verb *karath* and the noun *b'rith* were commonly employed in the ancient world to designate political treaties. The Bible's myriad examples of this usage include the treaty between Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 21:27 and the treaty between Isaac and Abimelech in Genesis 26:28.

Besides that political context, "to cut a covenant" is also the expression most commonly employed in the Hebrew Scriptures to designate Israel's several religious covenants. These include the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 34:10; Deuteronomy 5:2), the Davidic covenant (Psalms 89:4), and the covenant renewal under Ezra (Ezra 10:3). In fact, this is also the idiom used in the Bible's first account of the covenant with Abraham: "On the same day the Lord made a covenant (*karath b'rith*) with Abram" (Genesis 15:18).

The verb *karath* is avoided, however, in Genesis 9 and 17, where it is replaced by two verbs, *natan* ("give") and *haqim* "establish"), placing a greater emphasis on the generosity and the perpetuity of God's covenants with Noah and Abraham. In each case the covenant is portrayed as a gracious, reliable endowment.

Second, in both of these accounts the covenant remains God's own possession. This truth is conveyed in each case by the expression "*My* covenant" (Genesis (9:15; 17:7). That is to say, even as the Lord "gives" and "establishes" the covenant, it still belongs to His domain.

Third, both covenants are marked by specific signs, each called "the sign of the covenant" (*'oth b'rith*). In the case of Noah the "sign" is the rainbow (9:12-17), and in the case of Abraham it is circumcision (17:1).

In the covenant with Noah, moreover, it is specifically said that the function of the "sign," the rainbow, is to cause God to "remember" His covenant (9:15-16). The covenant sign thus serves as a "memorial" (Hebrew *zikkaron*, Greek *anamnesis*), a "reminder" to God of His gracious, perpetual endowment. He gazes upon the rainbow and He remembers.

This theme is taken up by Jesus, who likewise describes God's definitive covenant with the Church in terms of a memorial, a reminder. "This cup," He says, "is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (*eis ten emen anamnesin* - 1 Corinthians 11:24-25; Luke 22:19-20).

The Lord's Supper, that is to say, is the *'oth berith*, the sign of the covenant, causing the heavenly Father to "remember" His gracious and perpetual endowment to the Church, His established covenant with us in Jesus. When Christians gather to "do" (*poiete*) the Holy Eucharist, to break the bread and to share the cup of covenant, God gazes upon the act and He remembers. Such is the meaning of "Do this in remembrance of Me." Thus, as the covenants with Noah and Abraham are completed in the new covenant of Jesus' blood, so the primeval sign of the rainbow and the ancient rite of circumcision are fulfilled in the Holy Eucharist.

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