

The New Covenant

From the ashes of the ruined city and temple would rise a new Jerusalem. From the disruption and shattering of the old Covenant would rise a new and more glorious Covenant. It is that Covenant that lay at the heart of Israel's hope. It is that Covenant about which Jeremiah wrote about, and we heard, in our First Reading for today (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The way of salvation in both Covenants, the old and the new, is the same. A person is saved by faith in Christ. The believer under the old Covenant looked ahead to Christ as the fulfilment of all the types and pictures of the old Covenant. The believer under the new Covenant looks back to the accomplished work of Christ. Because the Lord understands human nature and its weakness for sinning, the Lord provided many ways under the old Covenant for the believer to receive forgiveness. Through many offerings and various sacrifices, the penitent sinner was assured he had been reconciled with God.

The old Covenant pointed to Christ as its fulfilment. By its very nature, then, it was temporary and passing. Many of its activities - the repeated animal sacrifices, for example - emphasised its transitory nature. The old Covenant, announced at Mount Sinai, also served to keep the Jewish people separate from the surrounding heathen. They were a unique nation preserved intact by the regulations laid upon them by the old Covenant. Their separation ensured that they would remain a people until the promised Messiah came.

Paul described this purpose of the old Covenant in Galatians 3:23-25: "*Before the faith came, we were being imprisoned by the Law, locked up until the faith came, which was about to be revealed.* ²⁴ *Therefore, the Law was our guardian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith.* ²⁵ *However, now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.*"

The old Covenant imposed many rules upon the Jews, rules they found impossible to observe. Hence, the old Covenant certainly proved that no one could be saved by keeping it. For that reason the Lord says of their fathers, "*They broke My Covenant.*" We would say that before the ink was dry, they broke the Covenant with the sin of the golden calf.

The Covenant of Sinai left no doubt in the minds of those who tried to observe it, who tried to keep all its rules and regulations that no one could be saved by observing the Law. Of course, that was never the purpose of the old Covenant. Paul underscored that truth when he wrote to the Galatians, "*We, who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners,' 16 know that a person is not justified by doing what the Law says but through faith in Jesus Christ... and not by the works of the Law, because no human being will be justified by the works of the Law*" (2:15-16).

At the first council of the Christian church, held at Jerusalem, Peter pleaded with his fellow Jews not to lay the burden of the regulations of the Sinaitic law upon Gentile believers: "*Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the necks of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?* ¹¹ *No! Through the grace of the Lord Jesus we believe to be saved, just as they also do*" (Acts 15:10,-11).

The old Covenant had several distinctive marks. It set out in the minutest detail how life was to be lived. Almost every aspect of Jewish life was regulated, from the kind of food one could eat to the touching of dead bodies. Two of the most prominent regulations were the Sabbath laws and the rite of circumcision. The old Covenant required endless animal sacrifices, day after day and year after year, showing that it was not God's final word to the human race. The old Covenant established a hereditary priesthood based on membership in one family (the family of Aaron) from one particular tribe (the tribe of Levi). No one else could minister at the Lord's altar. The old Covenant conferred privileges on and was limited to only one people, or nationality, the Jews.

In contrast, the new Covenant is far different. "*It will not be like the Covenant that I made with their fathers.*" It contains no laws, rules, or regulations that have to be kept. It has no external mark. It does not limit the priesthood and the right to approach God to any one group. Peter wrote to all Christians, "*You are ... a royal priesthood*" (1 Peter 2:9). It invites all, regardless of nationality, to believe. It sets aside ethnic, racial, and other boundaries. The invitation is to all the world; Pentecost demonstrated that. The new Covenant urges all to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth - "*I shall put My teaching inside them and write it on their hearts.*" This is the miracle of conversion. Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "*The time is coming and is now here when the genuine worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. For the Father is looking for such people to worship Him.* ²⁴ *God is a spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth*" (John 4:23, 24).

Under the new Covenant, the Holy Spirit, who has led us to call God "*Abba, Father,*" can make our response to his will a child's glad "I can! I will!" This is something the message announced from Mount Sinai could not do. All it could do was to force us to admit "I must!"

God's new Covenant is also new because the One who mediates it is One greater than Moses. The priests under the old Covenant could offer only the blood of bulls and goats, for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. But Christ, the Mediator of the new Covenant, offers the supreme sacrifice. He offers the sacrifice that matters. He offers the once-and-for-all sacrifice that pleases God and removes sin and guilt. He offers Himself. Freely and willingly, He sheds His blood and, by the shedding of His blood, takes away sin forever. By His sacrifice He opens the way to heaven. Nothing bars the way. The one who trusts Him has a wide-open approach to God. At Christ's triumphant words, "*It is finished,*" the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom, showing that a new and better way to God had been opened.

This new Covenant proclaims a salvation that is complete, finished, and, above all, free for the asking. It is a salvation won in and through Christ. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16).