

Sermon Lent 2 Year B 2024

A point not often properly appreciated is that the church has its own culture. In some church circles, there is a lot of talk about the need for the church to be ‘counter-cultural’. And in other church circles, there is a lot of talk about the church needing to ‘look out’ and take its cues from the surrounding culture. But in all these conversations it is important to remember that *the church has its own culture* which we are right to assert and celebrate. Part of this culture is that we have our own, distinct language. A ‘church language’, if you like. Now some may be ready to dismiss this aspect of our distinct culture as jargon or as alienating. But every field of human knowledge, every community organisation, every society has its own, peculiar language. Every career, trade and craft has terms, ideas and knowledge unique to them. Medicine, music, and mathematics all require the careful and time-consuming acquisition of their distinct language. They all have their own rules and structure, a grammar if you like.

And so too the church. The Christian faith has its own language, its own grammar. A language that speaks of the buildings we gather in: naves and chancels and gothic arches. A language that speaks of its objects: font and altar, chalice and ciborium. A language that speaks of its people: bishops and deacons, acolyte, thurifer, vergers, and sacristans; of Martyrs and Confessors and Saints. A language that speaks of shared behavior: of sacraments and Eucharist, baptism, confession and genuflection. A language that speaks of our distinct beliefs: of Incarnation, Trinity, and consubstantial. Many of these you will know. You inhabit the language. Some may still be strange to you. But almost certainly, for most others about us, this language – our language - will be as if we are speaking about astrophysics or in ancient Sumerian.

It is perhaps the temptation of modern man to try and flatten out the uniqueness of our ‘church’ language. We might appreciate the evangelical motivation around this. ‘Let’s make everything as simple as possible so everyone can understand.’ But this is kind of like trying to read Shakespeare in modern English. Or only playing music by ear. Or expecting a doctor to not bother about learning the proper names of human anatomy. Important things – critical things – will be lost. Flattening out our language - impoverishing it by ironing out all the tricky words and complicated ideas - in the end cannot be good. The faith we seek to commend must be the full-fat version! We have an incredibly rich and beautiful heritage, and a language to match. We have important ideas to communicate that needs a precise language to do so.

One of the key terms as Christians we have to come to terms with is the idea of ‘covenant.’ So important is this word that it is in fact the key to unlocking the entire biblical record. In many ways, the idea of covenant is the guiding framework to the whole grammar of our faith. At the heart of belief in covenant as revealed in the Bible, is that the God who has revealed himself through human history desires to be known, and that there may be a bond between creator and created. Now, for those familiar with the stories that convey this important idea this all seems pretty straightforward. But that just goes to highlight how deeply we inhabit this language. Because for most people, for most of human history, that *has not* been their understanding of the divine.

We confess faith in the God of Covenant who does not remain unknown and alien to us. He does not remain in heaven light years away. He does not display the capricious shenanigans of the gods of classical antiquity. Nor does he make the cruel and terrible demands of Molech or Baal. The God of Covenant is not an impersonal force or power. He is not the ‘watchmaker’ god. Nor is to be confused or conflated with the ‘great architect of the universe’. The consistent witness of our faith is that God reveals himself as One who through faithful promise seeks *relationship* with humankind.

It is this long and unfolding story that is laid out for us in all the Old Testament lessons this year over Lent. Because the story of Covenant is the story of the entire bible, what we hear in these passages only gives us a taster, a ‘highlights tour’. It really cannot be stressed enough that if we want to make sense of the bible, the overarching framework over which it all hangs is the idea of covenant. And that all its various iterations and developments all point to and find their fulfillment in Christ, which is why hear about it all now in this holy season. And so, last week from Genesis we heard of God rescuing Noah and his family from the flood, and the bow in the sky the sign of God’s promise to Noah. God says, *‘here is the sign of the covenant I make between myself and you and every living creature with you for all generations.’* Even at this early, primeval stage, the universal scope of Christ’s saving work is indicated. And salvation through the waters of the flood of course prefigures the saving waters of baptism.

In the lesson we have heard today, also from Genesis, we hear the troubling account of the sacrifice of Issac. The point of it all remains, however, that the boy *is not* sacrificed and that he is the son of promise, the son of Covenant. The covenant God had earlier established with Abraham is here repeated. *I swear by own self – it is the Lord who speaks - because you have done this, because you have not refused to me*

your only son, I will shower blessing upon you, will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and grains of sand on the seashore. In this, we are directed to the Son who is sacrificed, thereby opening up to us our inclusion in the inheritance.

Next week we jump to Exodus, and the covenant God makes with Moses in Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments. Important, because these Commandments distill what it means to be the covenant people of God. They are a holy people. A people set apart. And this 'looks like' something. Then, mid-lent we take up the story of Covenant from the book of Chronicles. A particular aspect of this story is Israel's turning its back on the covenant. *All the heads of the priesthood, and the people too, added infidelity to infidelity, copying the shameful practices of the nations and defiling the temple that the Lord had consecrated for himself in Jerusalem.* It is the story of spurning the relationship God had sought to build with his people. The chronicler realises this has a consequence. Covenant is a sacred bond and turning away from it has implications. For the author, the consequence is realized in the people of Israel being carried off into exile in Babylon for 70 years. But part of the pattern we ought to recognize is that there is always opportunity for covenant to be restored and renewed. At the end of that reading, we will hear how the people also return from exile.

Then, on the eve of Holy Week, we will hear from Jeremiah the prophet. *See the days are coming- it is the Lord who speaks – when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. But not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt....deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts.* Once more directing us to aspects of the covenant fulfilled in Christ. A covenant that is both personal and communal. When we gather here on Holy Saturday for the Easter Vigil, the long sequence of readings we hear that night will rehearse this story of salvation history again. We can only celebrate the resurrection in light of this long story.

Now, I do not point you to all this to give you six weeks of sermons in one day! I say it simply to remind us all of this central aspect of our faith, this central aspect of our understanding of God and of our identity as Christians. *We are the covenant people of God.* This is further presented to us in distilled form in the Gospel account placed before us today. The Transfiguration reveals Jesus as indeed the one who fulfills the Old Testament covenants as indicated by the presence of Moses and Elijah.

But it also points us to the new covenant in Jesus' blood. Immediately *before* the story of the Transfiguration, we hear the first prediction of Jesus' passion and death. At *the end* of the account today we hear that the disciples should tell no one of what they have witnessed until 'The Son of Man has risen from the dead.' These two details form a parenthesis to the entire story and point to the importance of this scene. Precisely because the glimpse of Jesus' divine glory points us to *the fruits* of Jesus' death and resurrection. By them, humanity's relationship with God takes a definitive leap. By them, the covenant is definitively fulfilled. By his cross and resurrection, Jesus opens up the way to perfect communion with God, the very glory the disciples have a glimpse of on the holy mountain. The very glory that we, by faith, now have as our inheritance. This sublime truth we can only come to appreciate when placed against the backdrop of covenant. It is the story that is key to unlocking the grammar of Christian faith. But it is also the story into which you and I have been written. Amen.