

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

RENEWING THE COVENANT

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom
my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him.*

ISAIAH 42.1

These words which Isaiah heard from God were heard again from heaven at Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan. This was the event that marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It was after his baptism that he went about preaching, teaching and healing all kinds of diseases. His words and his deeds were signs: they pointed to a reality which lay beyond themselves. That reality was the good news that in him God had come close to his people, and he was making a new covenant with them, and it was through Jesus, as Isaiah had said, that this new covenant was being made.

A covenant is a solemn bond, an open-ended commitment, which binds people together. God's covenant binds God to his people, and his people to him. Several times in the OT we read the covenant formula: 'I will be your God, and you will be my people.' God declared through Noah, through Abraham, and through Moses that he was binding himself to the Israelites: He would be their God and they would be his people. The religion of Israel was the religion of the covenant, and the terms of the covenant were set out in the first five Books of the Bible, the books of the Law. The tragedy of Israel was that it had forsaken the covenant, worshipped other gods, and behaved like the nations around it – the nations to whom Israel was meant to be a sign of God's presence in the world. God could have forsaken Israel, and chosen another People, but he did not, for that would be to deny his very nature and purpose – if your commitment is open-ended, you don't withdraw from it when it doesn't turn out as you hoped. Instead, as a further sign of his love and mercy, God offered his People a new relationship, a new covenant.

We stand within that new covenant. The sign of this is that at our baptism we received the same gift of the Holy Spirit as Jesus received when he was baptised. On the first Sunday after the Epiphany, when the Church celebrates the Baptism of the Lord, we remember our covenant with God, and what it requires of us.

A covenant creates a bond like a family tie, and the word 'covenant' is used to describe the marriage bond. Family bonds are with those whom we have been given, not with those whom we have chosen; we are united by our relationship to a common ancestor. Likewise, in the Church we do not choose our companions in Christ, they are given to us; and we are united by our common relationship with him. This bond – with Christ and with each other – is sealed by our participation in the Eucharist, where we recall the Last Supper, and in the bread and the wine receive for ourselves the tokens of God's love and of his presence with us. In place of the Law of the Old Testament we have the example of Christ himself to follow. In the Sermon on the Mount he spoke of the new law, the new worship, and the new community that he exemplified. In prayer, in study, and in worship we reflect on what his example requires of us, and we seek his strength to help us live his risen life.

In all this the astonishing thing is that *God has bound himself to us*. He says to us as he said to his people of old: I am your God and you are my People. That means that he cares for us; no matter what we do, he will not let us go. God delights over us, rejoicing in our joys, and sharing in our sorrows.

It is because God has bound himself to us that he depends on us. St Teresa of Avila put it very beautifully:

Christ has no body on earth but ours

No hands but ours

No feet but ours

*Ours are the eyes through which Christ looks out with
compassion on the world*

Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good

Ours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.

What is this work that God depends on us to do? Isaiah said it was to establish justice. Speaking of the Servant of the Lord, he said: 'he will bring forth justice to the nations... he will not grow faint or weary until he has established justice in the earth.' (Isaiah 42.1,2) We who stand within the New Covenant are also called to this work. It's a tough call.

So much of life denies any sense of a personal relationship with God, and any connection between faith and public life. Instead, all sorts of insidious pressures and influences persuade us that we are the centre of our lives, and that God is irrelevant. But establishing justice requires some conception both of a common good and of the end to which human life is directed. The common good transcends individual wants, whilst meeting individual needs, but if we are all our own centre then anything that can be meaningfully called the common good disappears. Our wants triumph over our brothers' needs, any sense of an ultimate purpose for human life, any shared idea of human fulfilment and destiny is lost - and with it goes any hope of shared moral values.

For years people have tried to find a secular basis for morality, but the attempt has failed because there is no agreement among the secularists on the end of human life, and without an end there is a moral vacuum. Morals are not free-standing, they are designed to serve an end, to help form a particular human character, a particular society, a particular world. We take as our character models sports stars and media celebrities, whose lives often witness to moral confusion rather than moral integrity. By contrast, Jesus offers us a vision of the true purpose of human life, of the end that morals are meant to serve. We are meant to become Christlike; that is the purpose of God's new covenant.

The great attraction of Jesus is that he shows us what a true human life is meant to be. He shows us that our eternal destiny is to be with God. He shows us the values on which the common good is built. Because of this, he is the One with whom God is well pleased. Jesus shows us what is possible if we take seriously the truth that

God has bound himself to us. Of course, there is nothing automatic in this; God can only work through us if we allow him to, but when we do then we are the equal of all that troubles us, from global warming to building a common life and finding personal fulfilment.

It may seem hard to believe, but *God's Holy Spirit is within us*. Today, God invites us to renew our covenant with him; to take Jesus as our Way of Life; to accept his call to work with him; to accept each other as the members of his family; and to receive his grace that we may find our true selves.

Let God be God: trust in his promises and believe that he has poured upon you his Spirit just as he poured it upon Jesus at the Jordan. He says to all of us, to you and to me, just as he said of Jesus: *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him.*

To God be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.