

“And for this cause he is the Mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

Christ is the Mediator of the new testament, the New Covenant, made in His blood. What is a covenant? We might be tempted to say that it is a contract, but this term is lacking in its gravitas. When we use the word “contract”, we think of business transactions, but a covenant is not merely a transaction for the mutual benefit of its parties. A covenant is a bond in blood attested to by God. God may be one of the parties, but covenants can be made between two mere people as well – think marriage.

In a covenant, there is a death and resurrection. The old person is killed, as it were, and a new person is born. This is usually symbolized by the shedding of blood, often in the form of a sacrifice. The animal represents the lives of those “cutting” the covenant, and its life, represented in its blood, is poured out. Often the animal then will be roasted and consumed so new life is engendered from the former life. The point here is that in a covenant, identities are changed. The covenant parties are no longer the same. Their very beings have been remade. The old persons have died, and a new lives has emerged. After the covenant, they are considered relatives – they are permanently bound together by the blood that was shed. A familial union has been established where none previously existed.

Of course, as the individuals within a family all have duties and responsibilities, there are consequences, both good and bad, if those duties aren’t fulfilled. In the cutting of a covenant, such duties of the parties, and the resultant blessings and curses received for honoring or dishonoring one’s obligations, are set forth. All of this is sealed by an oath, witnessed by God and man. To break one’s oath is to deny the identity that one has accepted in the covenant, and the implication then is that the blood of the life that was poured out at the

cutting of the covenant, was spilled in vain. Therefore, the one who breaks the covenant has denied his sacred oath. He has betrayed the covenant by which he is bound. He forfeits his life. Needless to say, it is unwise to enter into a covenant lightly. It is better to have never entered into a covenant than to break a covenant and call down the curses upon one's life.

So to understand our own salvation fully, we need this robust understanding of what a covenant is. As baptized into Christ, we are no longer partakers of the sin of Adam, but have been remade partakers of the righteousness of Christ, and we need to learn His righteousness and live His righteousness.

Also, this covenantal structure is particularly informative in helping us to understand the epistle lesson today where Christ presents His blood to God as evidence that the life of the sacrifice, Himself in this case, has been poured out. St. Paul says that Christ is the High Priest, presenting His own blood in the tabernacle not made with hands – which is His own person, the perfect union of God and man. Christ is the priest, the sacrifice, and the temple. It is all of Jesus. In the presentation of the sacrifice, Christ Himself enters into the heavenly holy of holies. In other words, Christ comes into the very Presence of God the Father, where He Himself is the evidence of the reconciliation between God and all of humanity through this New Covenant which is greater than and broadens the scope and power of the Old Covenant.

Our gospel lesson importantly highlights the perfection of the covenantal sacrifice. In John 8 we read of a confrontation between the Pharisees and Jesus. In our reading, the dialog begins, "Which of you convinceth me of sin?" The response of the Pharisees is similar to the accusations previously made, that Jesus is somehow allied with the Devil. The evidence for their respective cases? Christ works miracles that cannot be denied. Meanwhile the Pharisees are characterized by desperate *ad hominem* attacks. In doing so, however, they are actually

attacking God for Christ and God are one. Christ is the very, the perfect, image of the Father so to honor Christ is to honor God, and to dishonor Christ is to dishonor God.

Then, in this interchange, Jesus presses back against the Pharisees, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.” Of course this makes no sense to the Pharisees for they reason that their patriarch Abraham is dead, so Jesus is claiming to be greater than Abraham for Christ claims to transcend death. To this, Jesus responds, “Yes, you are getting it. Abraham was glad that I have come.” The Pharisees, however, are still locked in their presuppositions, for Jesus certainly isn’t older than Abraham. By appearances He is only around 30 years old. But then, Jesus is so clear that even the Pharisees understand what He means. “Jesus said unto them, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.’” This is the name that God used for Himself to Moses at the burning bush. God identifies Himself as “I Am,” as the source of all being. When Jesus claims this phrase for Himself, the Pharisees no longer can suppose that He claims anything for Himself except that He is indeed God.

The Pharisees responded appropriately to this claim. That is, if Jesus was not speaking the truth about who He was, but, in fact, Christ was both sinless, and divine. He was God made man, God with us. As such, He was the new covenantal head for humanity, living the holy life that was impossible for us. He was the perfect sacrifice who laid down His life so that we, who come under His covenantal headship, die with Him, and live with Him.

But practically, what difference does Christ make? Why did we need the New Covenant? Why was the Old Covenant insufficient? Both the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant made in Christ were a call to holiness to live as God’s special people. The Holy Spirit is involved in both covenants as well, and Christ also is at work in both. It is by the finger of God, which is the Spirit of God, that the Law is given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And St. Paul

says in 1 Corinthians 10, that Christ was present with the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness. He says that all of these were baptized into Moses and all ate the same spiritual food and drank of the same spiritual water from the rock. The Apostle then makes a startling claim, "And that rock was Christ." (1 Cor. 10:4) So the difference between these covenants is something more.

What the is the difference between them? The difference is the covenantal head. Moses was not sinless, nor was he God. Therefore the sin nature of the people remained as it always had been, and the law of God remained external to the people, written on tablets of stone.

However, in the New Covenant, our sins have been nailed to the cross. Christ's death is our death and thus, as He is now raised, we too now are raised with Him. For now, we are spiritually raised with Him, but eventually, in the life of the world to come, we too will be physically raised with renewed and glorified "spiritual" bodies as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. The difference then is that in the New Covenant we are reborn as new humans in a new family with a new nature, empowered by the eternal Spirit of God in a way that was impossible under the first covenant. All of this is made possible by Christ, God Incarnate entering into our humanity and our history and actually taking our sins upon Him. He is the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world. That means your sin. That means my sin. We are now the temple of God for the Spirit of God resides in us, and the law of God is no longer written on tablets of stone, but is written upon our very hearts.

Now it may be tempting for us to think that the Old Covenant was strictly about externals, while the New is about loving obedience, about our hearts. But the command to love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all of our strength was for the Old Testament as well as the New. But since the hearts of the people of God before the ministry of Jesus had not been renewed, they were perhaps limited in their ability to truly obey the law out of love

to the same extent that we are able to love, obey, and enjoy God. Without that internal renewal, the Hebrew ritual did devolve into action without intention. The sacrifices were performed while the people pursued immorality and idolatry. The ritual that was intended to point to Christ, became purely hypocritical. Theirs was a pretense of holiness that thinly covered deep depravity.

If the Hebrews were condemned by the prophets for this hypocrisy, then surely we, who have the Spirit of God and whose sins forgiven have even less excuse for our disobedience. And surely we should be all the more motivated to conform every thought and action to the righteousness of Christ. We should long to be holy. We should love to worship with the people of God. We should work to bring others into the Kingdom of God. All of these things we should do, and yet, too often our efforts are half-hearted and our affection for God is tepid. Are we hypocritical like the Hebrews? Are we Pharisaical, refusing to see Christ for who He is because it demands that we submit to Him?

This is indeed, our constant struggle. What once was new and exciting invariably becomes old again. We will grow complacent unless we do something about it. Lent is certainly a tried and true means of shaking us out of our languor. I pray that your Lenten season has thus far been encouraging as you persevere in your disciplines all the way to the cross. And to that end, let me encourage you to continue in them with determination. When you miss those things that you have denied yourselves, remember all that Christ gave up for you, and resolve to “suffer” with Him a while longer.

But beyond Lent, may we learn to always be aware of the great love that Christ has for His people, the great love that He has for you and I as demonstrated in all that He truly suffered for our sakes. This day we remember especially the Passion and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ. His death is our death, and His Resurrection is our resurrection. It is His blood which

is presented as evidence that the wages of sin have been paid. It is His blood that seals the New Covenant. And it is His Body and Blood that we take into ourselves as effectual signs of the grace of God to us. We are indeed very members of the divine family, partakers of the divine nature, no longer condemned with Adam, but raised with Christ. God grant that these historical and sacramental realities would ever shape our imaginations and transform us more and more into the perfect likeness of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.