

Prayer to Conclude our Studies

Anglican Diocese of Ballarat

Loving God,

You brought Noah and his family
through the flood to find safety
and make celebration on Mount Ararat,
you put a rainbow in the sky
to remind them of your promise;
help us when we find ourselves in the storms of life
to look for your promise
and wait patiently for its fulfillment.

Your covenant with Abraham
begins salvation history
as you act to reconcile a fallen world.
With Moses, you lead your people
from bondage and slavery into freedom
and establish a covenant which seeks to bring peace.

Your covenant with David
looks forward to a time
when a descendant of David
would bring peace and justice to all of God's people.
As we seek to live under this new covenant,
help us to remember that your promises
are from of old and that in Jesus
all things find their fulfillment.

When we doubt, reveal to us your rainbow.
When we fall, reach out to us in reconciliation.
When we are in bondage, lead us into liberation.
When we are hurt, come to us as the Prince of Peace.

This we ask through Him whose birth we celebrate
And whose name we honour, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Post Advent Study 2009 - A New Covenant -



a conclusion to the 2009 Advent Studies:

*God's Covenant with
Noah, Abraham, Moses and David.*

Christ and Abraham

Paul takes the blessings of Christ back to the covenant God made with Abraham proclaiming that it is through Jesus that all of the peoples of the earth find a blessing (Gal 3:14). While the covenant with Moses was made only with Israel (Rom 9:4; Eph 2:11-13) the Abramic covenant is universal. More than just the universalism of the Abramic covenant, the covenant with Moses is tied up with the law and for Paul the law was a curse for the people who tried to live it. But Jesus, who was himself cursed (he died on a cross a death of shame) becomes a blessing and a liberation for all who believe (Gal 3:10-14). What saves and gives life is not lawful living but living in Christ. Christ alone saves us from sin and death. Nothing else.

Paul insists that Christians are set free from the Law (Rom 7:6) and that Christ brought an end to the Law (Rom 10:4). In Judaism the Law is central and binding though the reality was that it could never bring freedom. For Christians though, it is Christ who is central and it is the new covenant that was written in his blood that surpasses all other covenants and which is eternal. Not even our sins and unbelief can undo what God has done in his Son.

1. For the followers of Jesus all men and women are their brothers and sisters in Christ.
 - How we understand ourselves and our relationship with others is through Jesus Christ who became one of us, who shared our humanity.
 - What should that mean for the way we live in and with the world around us?
2. God chose one people, the Hebrews, out of all of the people of the world and made them his own. He did this so that all people could come to know him through the witness of their lives. Now God has invited all men and women into a covenanted relationship with him in and through his Son.
 - What does that mean for our sense of mission and evangelism?
 - How might that help shape the drawing up of our priorities as a parish?
 - In what way can that help us work through our successes or failures as God's children?

3. How should we now deal with sin in our lives? We are not obliged by the laws demanding an annual Yom Kippur type sacrifice so how do we deal with our sins and failings?

What does having Jesus as the source of the New Covenant in God mean for us when we struggle with sin?

All are made clean in Christ

In this letter, it is made clear that what God wants is obedience and not more sacrifices. The death of his only Son had made perfect those who come to him, believe in him and who follow his commands. Through his death they share in his life and in his ministry. Their sins are forgiven and so there is no longer any need for sin offerings and sacrifices. Jesus has replaced both the goat of sacrifice and the goat given over to Azazel. What counts now is how a person lives his or her life in the light of the ministry and teachings of Jesus. Obedience is what is important.

Christianity is not a religion – it is a way of life. We have religious beliefs but those beliefs are only catalysts to action. Christianity cannot be summed up in a list of laws. One can only be a Christian when there is a lifestyle that proclaims and gives witness to a particular way of life.

1. What are the key characteristics of the Christian way of living?
2. What are the hallmarks of life in the New Covenant?

A New Covenant

In the Bible, the word “testament” was chosen as the word describing the relationship that existed between God and his people. God had made a number of covenants or testaments with his people. So far we have looked at those with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David; but none of them seemed to be able to bring the people into a life of sustainable obedience. Time after time they were broken and the people were punished. But God, ever faithful, gave them new opportunities to begin again.

The New Covenant is promised

In Jeremiah 31:31-33 we read the following promise: Behold the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors the day when I took them by the hand to lead them forth out of the land of Egypt...I will plant my law within them and write it upon their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people”. It would seem that the early Church understood the person and ministry of Jesus in the light of these readings (2 Cor 3:6; Gal 4:24-26). As we read the accounts of the last supper (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25) we can see how the Christians understood that in the blood of Jesus God was renewing the covenants he had made of old and in their freshness there was a new dimension: it was open to people beyond the nation of Israel. The blood of Jesus was shed for you and for ALL so that sins could be forgiven. The old covenants were now obsolete (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24) and in Jesus there was a new covenant.

1. When God promised through Jeremiah that this new covenant would be placed in their minds written in their hearts, what do you think that meant?
2. What is the difference between that kind of covenant and the other covenants we have looked at?

The Letter to the Hebrews

We can turn to the Letter to the Hebrews for some help in understanding how the Church came to understand Jesus and the new covenant. That letter (we know nothing of its author or where and when it was written) begins with an affirmation that the Christ is superior to everything that had gone before him in Israel (1:1-3). He is God's Son who made "purification for sins" and who is now seated at the side of God in all glory and power. There is no point in going back to earlier covenants if we wish to understand what God is doing now for it has all been surpassed by the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. All that we do today needs to be interpreted and read in the light of Jesus, particularly in the light of his death.

While he was as man lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5-7) everything is now subjected to him. Though he existed before the angels and was superior to him, he took on human form, human nature and became man. This is important for the author because clearly the community to which he is writing is a community under stress and persecution. He is reassuring them it is God's plan that exultation should come through suffering. They do not have to live in power and privilege to be saved. Christ underwent suffering and death for the salvation of all men and women and in his sufferings he was made perfect. As (they) we share in his suffering so (they) we participate in his exultation (2:10). It is because Jesus was tempted and because he suffered that he is then able to help those who have to undergo temptation and endure suffering in their lives (2:14-18). This is the hallmark of the New Covenant. It is about a God who is intimately united to us in his Son.

1. This insight of the writer stands in great contrast to much of the thinking of the world around us where power, privilege, money and might are what makes life worth living.

How might the blessings of littleness, powerlessness and suffering help us to understand our place in the world?

2. Jesus went through suffering. He died. He rose and is now seated at the right hand of God (the hand of power) in glory.

In what way is this a very reassuring and comforting message for his followers?

Jesus and the New Covenant

Hebrews 8:8-13 makes it clear that the first covenant that was made with Moses is now old, out of date and has now run its time. In chapter 9 he compares the death of Jesus with the rituals that were carried out on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). These sacrifices were carried out in the Tabernacle, or the Tent of Meeting that was carried along with the people as they wandered through the wilderness during the Exodus. Our author (and Paul (Romans 3:25) refer to the place where the blood of the sacrifices was sprinkled to take away the sins of the people. This provides the background to their understanding of what the outpouring of the blood of Jesus meant. While the High Priests of Israel had to go back year after year in an attempt to bring about the forgiveness of sins, Jesus died only once (10:1-18). His once for all sacrifice took away forever the power of sin and darkness of those who believed in him. The new covenant was formed in and through his blood.

Yom Kippur: (Leviticus 16)

This feast (the Day of Atonement) took place annually and was seen as a sacrifice of the removal of sins. There were two main parts: the purification of the sanctuary and the sending out of the sacrificial goat and with him the sins of the people. Two goats would be brought in and one chosen by lot. One was sacrificed to God and the other was destined for the demon Azazel who lived in the wilderness. The High Priest would lay both of his hands on the goat and confess the sins of Israel, transferring those sins to the hapless animal. The goat was then released into the wilds. By carrying the sins out of the camp the nation is thus purified. He becomes the vehicle of their purification.

1. One of Paul's constant themes is that we do not have to "do" anything to be saved - apart from aligning ourselves with Christ. "Saving" is what God does to us and for us in Jesus.

How does this make us different from the Hebrew people of the Old Covenant?

2. In the Eucharist (the Mass) we celebrate the death of Jesus and in the celebration of the liturgy we are taken back to Golgotha, to be there at the foot of the Cross. Jesus is not re-crucified and we are not simply remembering something. He died once and for all on Good Friday, but our celebration is a participation in the saving event of his death.

How might that affect the way we participate in the Mass and see its importance?

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