

FIRST READING: Genesis 17:3-9

A reading from the Book of Genesis:

When Abram prostrated himself, God spoke to him: "My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a host of nations. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you. I will maintain my covenant with you and your descendants after you throughout the ages as an everlasting pact, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land in which you are now staying, the whole land of Canaan, as a permanent possession; and I will be their God." God also said to Abraham: "On your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 105:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

The Lord remembers his covenant for ever.

Look to the LORD in his strength; seek to serve him constantly. Recall the wondrous deeds that he has wrought, his portents, and the judgments he has uttered.

The Lord remembers his covenant for ever.

You descendants of Abraham, his servants, sons of Jacob, his chosen ones! He, the LORD, is our God; throughout the earth his judgments prevail.

The Lord remembers his covenant for ever.

He remembers forever his covenant which he made binding for a thousand generations – Which he entered into with Abraham and by his oath to Isaac.

The Lord remembers his covenant for ever.

GOSPEL: John 8:51-59

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said to the Jews: "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." So the Jews said to him, "Now we are sure that you are possessed. Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? Or the prophets, who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is worth nothing; but it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' You do not know him, but I know him. And if I should say that I do not know him, I would be like you a liar. But I do know him and I keep his word. Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM." So they picked up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid and went out of the temple area.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 5th Thursday of Lent

Just what is the covenant with Abram? “You are to become the father of a host of nations!” This was so significant an event that God changed Abram’s very name to include the covenant; Abraham. Each time Abram now thought of whom he had become, Abraham, was to remember God’s promise and fidelity. The covenant with God became part of Abraham’s very identity. In fact, Abraham’s only issue was Isaac. All that Abraham contributed to this event was his complete trust in God; which was a sign of his depth of faith. He would never know how the promise would be fulfilled. All he knew was God’s promise. His son was born when both he and Sarah were near death. They didn’t even live long enough to know their two grandchildren, Esau and Jacob.

I am your God and you are my Abraham. This isn’t a state of ownership. When we use language like this, what do we mean? When we say you are mine and I am yours, what do we mean? We are family. We are part of each other, together. We are made of the same DNA. This is the notion of covenant. Since each of us is human, we are flawed. We make mistakes. We can be cruel, thoughtless and petty. That’s why we can have a lot of troubled relationships. We have a tough time to forgive both our loved ones, friends and, especially, enemies. We sin.

This is not the nature of God. God is perfect, just and love. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional. This makes up, within the covenant, for the fact that we have our limits. God has none. God told Moses that God’s name is I AM WHO AM. The verb to be is the basis for this name. God is being now, the eternal now. This has implications for Abraham and his descendants of blood and of faith. Abraham and the covenant are alive in us as well as God for we are the fruits of the covenant’s promise. Because we believe in God and in the one God sent, Jesus, we live in God and God in us. We are alive in Abraham too. This has implications for the words of Jesus in today’s gospel.

The Lord remembers his covenant forever. These are apt words as the response for the Psalm. But, as inquiring persons want to know, does God remember our transgressions, mistakes and sin forever? God seems to have a long memory; forever is a long time. There may be things that we do that can bring an end to a deep, loving relationship. That’s what everyone who marries proclaims. Many people get divorced and there are former friends to whom I rarely speak. With us, reconciliation is always a possibility while people still live. It may not always be easy or likely, because failure is always a human fundamental option. Not, though, with God who is all perfect; God’s bonds to us are unbreakable. God’s grace prevails beyond death. God is love in perfect compassion and mercy. God seeks to forgive sin as a result.

I remember a story that an old nun told me. She’s been dead since the late ‘80s. When she entered the convent as a young woman, just out of high-school, her father disapproved and told her that if she ever left the convent, she was no longer welcome to come home. She carried that pain into old age. Then her brother died, also in old age. As she sat, with family, friends and religious sisters, she was struck with a sense of peace. She had a full life as a religious woman, teacher and Christian. Her perceived vocation proved to be real. She no longer felt the pull of her father’s harsh words. She realized at that moment, sitting quietly at her brother’s wake to have forgiven her old man. She was reconciled with her life’s choice, work, calling and father. This is how God is faithful and remembers the covenant forever. I’ve had experiences like this too; have you?

Bible stories can be long ago, far away and affect the lives of their characters, whom we place on pillars. We can forget that the stories reflected their lives as fellow human beings. Their

specialness has grown over time and reverence. At one time they were as real as we are. They had troubles and trials, doubts and questions and they faced their own deaths. All that Abraham and Sarah had was the hope for a child and with the passing of their lives became less of a possibility. Faith in God strengthened their hope and made Isaac a reality. They never saw the nation part. God offers us sufficient grace too. We've made it to today, haven't we? It may be small, but upon reflection we can glimpse God.

The covenant is what God gives us, not vice versa. When we pray, we give nothing to God. Our prayer is God's gift to us as to enter more deeply into our lives as we enter more deeply into the life of God. What is the fruit of our sin? As the Exultet proclaims, at the Holy Saturday Vigil, "O, happy fault; O necessary sin of Adam!" Jesus is the fruit of our sin. Had there never been sin, Jesus would never have offered his life for ours. We would have no need for God or saving. In God's life the fruit of our sin is forgiveness through Christ. God uses our sin as the means to rely on God even more.

Jesus made an astounding, confounding and even absurd statement to the crowds. "Whoever keeps my word will never see death." His audience then called him possessed. Their reaction and response is irrelevant. To note it and all can be a red herring, a distraction. What's our reaction? Do we hear Jesus' word? We have read or heard his word in faith. Faith is a gift that God has given us and not to the crowds. We may become distracted by their words and rebellion. But Jesus' word is never for those who have not yet received God's gift of faith. It's always for us who have it. The fact is that all people present for Jesus' preaching did die. The believers, apostles, Pharisees and scribes are all dead and long buried. Jesus himself has died too. But, as we used to pray at mass, "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." This is the mystery of faith with which God has gifted us.

Given what I wrote above of being alive in God and God being alive in us through faith, that's the word that Jesus spoke. The gospel of John began with God's Word that spoke the cosmos. God's Word also spoke us. God's Word is Jesus; God born a human being like us in all but sin. As Jesus rose and in him we believe, we share the life of God now and in the life to come after our death. All those, in faith before us and those who've left us in death, are still with us as they share God's life too. This is what we call the communion of saints in the creed. Communion, here, is the life of God that binds; the covenant God remembers forever. God, as the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Peter, Paul, you and me, is the living God of the living.

Jesus invoked the name of God, as given to Moses, I AM, for himself. As God's son, Jesus is fully God. As son of Mary, Jesus is fully human as well. The original name that God gave to Moses is reflexive, falling back and moving ahead on itself, "I AM WHO AM." God as a person encompasses all being. The entire cosmos reflects God's being if we look. If we look we will find God, in nature, in others, in joy, in sorrow, in fear and in doubt. To whom do we turn in those moments? To whom do we turn in our sins? Our turning to God is all God seeks from us. God gives us the grace to do so. God is always there; a mere thought away. The everlasting Lord is now.

May we listen for the Word of God at any time; we will hear him.

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