

As we go through this season of Lent, our Old Testament Lessons share a common theme of Covenant, a relationship between God and his people, a relationship of promise, of commitment. Like all relationships it is a living thing. It had its periods of trial, of tension, of failure. But God's abiding commitment to the Covenant has sustained a community of faith through a long and tortuous history. This morning, instead of focussing on our particular Old Testament lesson, I want to reflect on Covenant, and in particular relationships within the Covenant community.

Covenant is essentially with community. Even when expressed in individual terms it is still with the community with whom that individual is associated. And so it is expressed in community, in all the strengths and weaknesses of community.

Starting with our Old Testament Lesson; it represents a re-affirmation of God's promise to Abram when he called him to leave his native land and travel to the land of Canaan; a promise of land, a promise of descendants. In time Abram will have a son Ishmael through Hagar before having a son Isaac through Sarai and the younger will displace the older as Hagar and Ishmael are driven away.

The younger displacing the older is replicated at different stages in the Genesis story:

Jacob displaces Esau, obtaining his father Isaac's blessing by deceit.

Joseph is favoured by his father over and against his older brothers and is not slow to remind them of the fact.

So one of the threads running through the Covenant community from generation to generation is that of very strong sibling rivalries, which at various stages threaten to spill over into blood shed.

Sure doesn't it happen in all families? Of course it does – you see it with the arrival of new children in a family – as the older child fears that his/her special place in the hearts of Mum and Dad is under threat. You see it when parents die and tensions between siblings can resurface as funeral arrangements are made.

These Old Testament sibling rivalries were drawn to my attention as I read a book by Dr Jonathan Sacks (you'll gather he is quite a favourite of mine!) as he reflected on the tensions between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all three of whom look to the figure of Abraham and the covenant with Abraham as fundamental to their own self understanding. Of course some of the sharpest tensions are sectarian tensions within individual faiths, such as Catholic and Protestant, Sunni and Shi-ite, sharing so much in common, their differences are viewed as heretical. You see it in communities and nations – civil war (as we experienced in Ireland) leaves deep wounds in society as those who fought side by side for independence turn on each other.

Lest you feel I am just going to leave you depressed at the unending consequences of these sibling rivalries, let us examine further these Old Testament sibling relationships. In a passage I came across only recently we find the figures of Isaac and Ishmael standing alongside each other at the funeral of their father Abraham. Jacob and Esau had separated in great hostility. Many years later we read of Jacob's fears as his estranged brother approaches and he sends extravagant gifts ahead of him to appease his brother. But the meeting of the two brothers is one of affection, marked by a mutual embrace. Then of course there is that beautiful scene as Joseph is reconciled to his brothers as he reveals himself to them not as the austere Egyptian official they first thought him to be but as the brother whom they had sold into slavery.

There is nothing superficial about these reconciliations – they are acts of genuine healing. What this reminds me is that reconciliation must lie at the heart of the Covenant community – reconciliation with God and reconciliation with each other. This of course is fundamental to our understanding of the Gospel as we follow in the footsteps of him who taught the importance of forgiveness, not seven times but seventy seven times, of turning the other cheek, of going the second mile, who prayed for those who nailed him to the Cross, who taught us to pray, ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.’

This fundamental reconciliation with God and with one another is brought out in words we use as we break the bread before we share the bread and wine of Communion:

The bread which we break
is a sharing in the body of Christ.
**We being many are one body,
for we all share in the one bread.**

Of course at some point this must work itself out in the situations we face in daily living, or as the Americans have a lovely way of putting it ‘where the rubber hits the road’.

There is a power in reconciliation that can bring hope and healing in seemingly intractable situations. As I was thinking around this, my mind went back to my childhood. I recall my parents hearing and reading in genuine amazement news reports of the historic meeting between Charles de Gaulle, newly declared President of France and Conrad Adenauer, Chancellor of West Germany in 1958. During the War, de Gaulle had been a rallying figure for the Free French and Adenauer had been frequently harassed and imprisoned by the Nazi regime. Using the wonders of Google, I found news footage of the time of de Gaulle and Adenauer driving through Paris in an open topped car – even at

this distance in time you can sense the emotion of those watching on the streets of Paris; in this visible sign of reconciliation between leaders of old enemies, something new, something exciting was happening.

I find that iconic events such as this can be a source of great encouragement as I seek to respond to God's call in Christ to faithfulness, to reconciliation in the turmoil of everyday life. I find I return to the words of St Francis with renewed confidence, renewed hope:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

We began with Abram, seeking to understand and respond to God's call and promise to him.

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. *Gen 12:1,2*

As we lay claim to God's blessing upon us, may we be enabled to be a blessing in whatever situation God has placed us.