

13th March 2022 – Second Sunday of Lent

Some years ago, we were in the Western desert of Egypt. It's real desert a couple of days drive from civilisation in any direction. Two things surprised me. First the noise! The desert isn't silent. The wind, the sound of your walking, and even your own breathing, fills your ears. The other surprise was that the stars are the same as our stars. We could lie in the tent looking up at the deep, luminous sky of the desert with the stars hanging at different levels, and they were the familiar stars – Orion and the Seven Sisters and the Milky Way.

Three thousand years ago, in another desert but under the same night sky, Abram was overwhelmed by a sense of God's promise that Abram would be the father of a great nation. The promise of a son was enough of a miracle, the thought that his descendants would be too many to count was overwhelming. But Abram didn't know that one of his descendants would be Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, and Abram himself would be the spiritual father Jews, Muslims and the entire Christian world.

God's words to Abram were like a proposal of marriage with the gift of land, the promise of a long and faithful relationship and the anticipation of children. The promise of relationship was sealed by a covenant – with that rather strange ritual of cutting animals in half. Don't get hung up on that. To us it's strange but then it was like getting out a fountain pen and a blotter to sign the marriage register.

So what is a covenant? Literally, 'coming together' and it's based on the deep ties of loyalty within ancient middle Eastern families. Covenantal loyalty involves sacrifice and it is sealed in blood. At its simplest two friends become blood brothers by mingling their blood and are then loyal allies for life. Think of the NATO alliance. If a NATO member is attacked all of NATO will respond even at risk to their own nations. That is characteristic of covenantal loyalty – to the point of shedding blood.

A word of warning though. Not all relationships for which people are prepared to shed blood are Godly. We can be mistaken or misled. There may well be courageous Russian soldiers in Ukraine preparing to die in service of their country, mistakenly believing they are liberators and that the destruction they find is the result of Ukrainian violence. That doesn't justify their behaviour but it may go some way towards explaining it.

Marriage is often quoted as an example of Covenant. In marriage we make lifelong vows. But if a spouse is being emotionally or physically damaged by a relationship, the Anglican church recognises that it can be right to leave. In reality, though our sentimental age believes that marriage is eternal, Jesus is more pragmatic and suggests marriage vows are not eternal but end at death. So perhaps Baptism is a better example of covenantal relationship since baptismal promises are eternal.

The Old Testament covenant, a promise of mutual faithfulness between God and human beings, would be tested over and over again and always hold firm. For the Jews, circumcision, keeping the laws of Moses and living in the promised land were signs of their covenantal relationship with God. And the fruits of that relationship are celebrated in psalm twenty-seven – trust, faith and joy. "Though a host encamp against

me yet will I not be afraid, and though there rise up war against me, yet will I put my trust in him.” “I will sing and make music to the Lord.”

The Old Testament covenant was the relationship of trust in God into which Jesus was born. But by the time he died, Jesus had brought in the new covenant – a new marriage between God and God’s people. And this covenant is not just for the Jews but for everyone. ‘I when I am lifted up,’ Jesus says in John (12.32) ‘Will draw all people to myself.’ And at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel the disciples are sent to tell the good news of the resurrection throughout the world and to baptise everyone into the New Covenantal relationship.

The new Covenant like the old is a Covenant made in blood – in Christ’s blood. We will hear this morning as we hear every Sunday the words, ‘This is my blood of the new Covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.’ We have come a long way since the Abramic covenant. As in a good marriage, our understanding of God has changed and grown to the point where we know ourselves to be surrounded by and suspended in God’s love. As Christians have grown in our understanding of God’s grace. We can still find the night sky breath-taking, and it can still remind us of God’s power and might and love, but we now know the depths of that love. The blood sealing the new Covenant is not the blood of sacrificial animals cut in half, nor even our own blood, but Christ’s blood shed for us.