

The Second Sunday of Lent

March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God makes a covenant with Abram – actually, God makes many covenants with him, all of which involve two promises. First, Abram will be the father of many nations; his descendants shall be as many as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand in the desert. Second, Abram and all his descendants will possess the land, Canaan, or we should say Israel, forever: the covenant is made with all generations to come, forever.

The language is interesting. God simply says I will do this for you, and you will worship me. It's not conditional; the word "if" isn't there. Abram's descendants added the word "if" when they constructed the Law, an enormous body of rules and practices for the people of Israel, rules and practices to be scrupulously followed because, if not, God would cancel the entire covenant. That's not a covenant; it's a contract. God does not say to Abram, if you do such and such, then I will do such and such.

What, then, is the response to God's covenant with His people, with us? Paul goes on and on about it; the answer is faith. Faith supplants the Law. Without faith in God all the rules and practices mean nothing: faith, not because God makes it a condition to be fulfilled to receive

His grace and love, but because it is what flows naturally from us in response to that grace and love.

Faith leads to commitment. Jesus' commitment to God the Father is the cross. He must be rejected and killed if He is to be raised. Christ died for all – all of Abram's descendants, including you and me, for all time.

The Resurrection is the supreme fulfillment by God of His covenant with us.

The faith of Jesus is perfect; His commitment is complete. Peter's faith is imperfect; he questions God. Peter for the moment is Satan, the tempter of the wilderness, reappearing in the person closest to Jesus.

So, how is our commitment; how is our faith? We can be like Peter, can't we? We do question and doubt; we do occasionally usurp the power of God and do things our own way, often with dreadful results.

But our commitment can be greater, can be more. The model for our commitment as Christians is that of Jesus. His cross is our cross. His self-denial and trust in God should be ours. To die? People do die for their faith and commitment even as we speak but, barring that, in countless ways of self-denial. A very old Lenten practice was to give up something significant to us as an act of self-denial. That's a good practice that is, sadly, often trivialized.

Perhaps the greater self-denial is giving others the gift of our time and energy, time and energy usually devoted to ourselves, given to another who is in need of us. Self-denial can be seen in acts of charity and kindness, in concern for others without any expectation of reward or acknowledgment, without placing our "if" on our covenant with our brothers and sisters.

In His Holy Name.