

I Sunday of Advent – The Covenant

In the name of the Father ...

Immersing us in - and making us participants of - salvation history, the Church's liturgical year begins in sombre fashion - violet vestments, the altar unadorned, the *Gloria* not sung, short days and an ambience of darkness - recalling the exile from the Garden after the Fall of Adam and Eve. And yet there is hope of approaching light. St Paul observes: *The night is far gone, the day is at hand.*¹

Casting our first parents out of the Garden, God addressed the serpent: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed: he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*² The unfolding of this enigmatic covenant is salvation history, central to which are the woman and her seed.

The liturgical year is formed around two major seasons: the second recalls the decisive battle between the *woman's seed* and the serpent, wherein the serpent strikes the woman's seed, but in the very process is crushed. This is the season of Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

Prior to this, the liturgical season extending from Advent through (Christmas and Epiphany) to the Presentation, recalls the expectation and emergence in history of *the woman and her seed, at enmity with the serpent.*

St Matthew's gospel opens: *The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*³ God had promised progeny to Abraham: *The Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him ... walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you ... Behold my covenant is with you... I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you.*⁴ Thus Matthew's genealogy of the Christ is a royal genealogy of kings.

God further specified: *This is my covenant... between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised... it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you... So shall my covenant be in your flesh, an everlasting covenant.*⁵ God conferred on Abraham a visible - carnal - sign of their covenant which, not so much a mark of election was rather a reminder that the human nature passed on through generation is corrupted by Original Sin.⁶ It was a mark of the need of redemption.

Like the words addressed to the serpent, God's covenant with Abraham was enigmatic. The prophet Isaiah records God addressing the Messiah: *I have given you as a covenant to the people...*⁷ The Messiah himself says: *The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named me ... He said to me: ... I*

¹ [Rom 13:11-12](#)

² [Gen 3:15](#)

³ [Mt 1:1](#)

⁴ [Gen 17:1-6](#)

⁵ [Gen 17:10-13](#)

⁶ This would be replaced by the mark or character of Baptism, passed on through spiritual regeneration as a sign of election as a son of God, c.f., [Mt 20:20](#) – *Whose image and inscription*, the inscription on the coin being "Son of God."

⁷ [Isa 42:6](#)

have ... given you as a covenant to the people.⁸ *Covenant*, then, was a name of the Messiah, so that God's covenant with Abraham ultimately referred not to something, but someone.

Mindful of God's promise to Abraham, St Matthew recalled another prophecy of Isaiah of the Christ's advent: *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel – which means: God with us.*⁹ God had told Abraham: *[M]y covenant is with you. God's covenant with us is God with us*, not something but someone. God's promise to Abraham: *so shall my covenant be in your flesh*, immediately a mark of slavery, foreshadowed the prologue of John's gospel that ... *the Word became flesh.*¹⁰

Indeed, God may have afforded Abraham a vague intuition of this. Harassed by the Pharisees for his claims to divinity, Our Lord rebuked their unbelief: *Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.*¹¹

Further, God had told Abraham: *be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you.* God would make his covenant only with a blameless parent.

The Messiah also was the promised seed of King David.¹² Matthew arranged his genealogy into three groups of fourteen generations, fourteen being the sum of the numeric values of the Hebrew characters spelling David's name. The first group of fourteen ends with ... *David, the King,*¹³ David being the seed of Jesse. God had promised of David's son: *I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son,*¹⁴ so that from the time of Solomon, *son of God* was a title of Jewish kings.

Again, God's promise was enigmatic, and like Abraham, David may have been vaguely aware of its deeper meaning. Rebuking the Pharisees for their lack of belief, Our Lord questioned them: ... *the Christ, whose son is he?" They said to him, "David's."* He said to them, *"How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord... If David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"*¹⁵

Long after David's death, Isaiah prophesied of the Christ that ... *there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*¹⁶ Paralleling the first group of fourteen in Matthew's genealogy, the third group of fourteen ends with ... *Jesus who is called the Christ.*¹⁷ The thirteenth generation in this third group, the stump of Jesse, is not Joseph - who was not the child's father - but the Virgin, a woman.

⁸ [Isa 49:1-8](#)

⁹ [Mt 1:23](#)

¹⁰ [Jn 1:14](#)

¹¹ [Jn 8:56](#)

¹² [2 Sam 7:12ff](#)

¹³ [Mt 1:6](#)

¹⁴ [2 Sam 7:14](#)

¹⁵ [Mt 22:43-46](#)

¹⁶ [Isa 11:1-2](#)

¹⁷ [Mt 1:20](#)

Matthew ends the genealogy with Joseph - and restarts it with the Blessed Virgin, possibly intimating God's intervention in history so that the human nature transmitted by generation but corrupted by Original Sin was communicated neither to her – in fulfilment of God's injunction to Abraham to be blameless – nor therefore to her son, so that the woman and her seed both appeared in history at enmity with the serpent.

This new liturgical year begins in exile, lamenting the Fall and Original Sin. St Paul exhorts us to *put off the works of darkness*:¹⁸ we are called to acts of fasting, alms giving and prayer to remedy disordered love of self. This new liturgical year begins, also, with hope of approaching light. Our prayer should include time, as St Paul exhorts, to *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*,¹⁹ to ponder and rejoice in the wonders which God in his providence has worked among us - the Immaculate Conception and the Incarnation - as the beginnings of redemption, the entry of the promised Messiah into human history, *God's covenant* with us - *God* with us - in human flesh, the eternal Son of the Father, *the seed of the blameless woman*.

In the name of the Father ...

¹⁸ [Rom 13:12-13](#)

¹⁹ [Rom 13:14](#)