Jesus and the New Covenant

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Fifth Sunday of Lent
Sunday Readings for March 25, 2012 for Cycle B:
Jer 31:31-34; Ps 51; Heb 5:7-9; Jn 12:20-33

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The relationship between the one and the many has occupied the attention of philosophers for millennia. On the human level, the manner in which people and cultures deal with the relation between the individual and the community is crucial to peace, whether in the family or in larger societies. What is the theological vision of the church on this question?

At all times and among every people, God has given welcome to anyone who reveres him and does what is right (see Acts 10:35). It has pleased God, however, to make human beings holy and save them, not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness (Vatican Council II, The Church, #9).

The covenant with Abraham, "father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:4-5) and Moses at Mount Sinai (Ex 20:1-17) brought Israel progressively into service of God and the holiness of the Chosen People became a light to the nations. At every stage of history God's grace was offered to all people of good will, but the benefits of the developing vision of the divine plan were unique. These blessing belonged to Israel but were meant to be shared. Thus was prepared the new and perfect Covenant which we Christians believe was ratified in Christ, with the more luminous revelation given through God's very Word made flesh (see The Church, #9).

After the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE, the prophet Jeremiah offered hope to the surviving remnant of Judah, then enslaved in Babylon. A new covenant is promised; it will unite all twelve tribes in God's service, even though the "ten tribes" had disappeared long before (in 721 BCE). During the First Temple period, the Law given at Mount Sinai had functioned as Israel's civil and criminal code, and therefore governed the community. Undoubtedly each person's conscience always should have been guided by these commandments, but, after the Exile, people became more sensitive to the interior demands of this expression of God's will. The Law of the New Covenant would be written upon the human heart, guiding the individual from an interior principle. Ideally, there would be no need for the detailed instruction of teacher because "from the least to the greatest, all shall know me," says the Lord (Jer 31:34). This knowledge is a personal experience of God's presence and love in the life of the individual and of the community. This divine love has many components; the first is forgiveness. "I will forgive their evil doing and remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:34).

This text, and the description of Moses sealing the Sinai Covenant with a sacrifice (Ex 24:1-11), were the background for Jesus' words over the cup of wine at the Last Supper. Wine, the Jewish symbol for joy in God's service, also became the sign of the sacrifice whereby sins are forgiven.
The Gospel according to John, which designates that Jesus is the Lamb of God, victim for the sin of the world (1:29), hints at the covenant experience in the use of the reciprocal clauses formula, "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). This series begins in the eucharistic discourse (John 6:56), continues in the Good Shepherd's declaration of mutual knowledge (10:14-15) and dominates John's account of the Last Supper (14-17). The importance of the Covenant and Jeremiah's prophecy to John is part of the heritage the Jewish Scriptures gave to the early Church, rooted in the vision of Jesus himself.

Like the people who composed the Dead Sea Scrolls (which also use Jeremiah's prophecy), Jesus stressed the reunification of the twelve tribes by choosing twelve apostles (see Mat 19:28; Luke 22:30).

During his public ministry, Jesus built upon the spiritual traditions of the Jewish community and only on occasion did he minister to the needs of gentiles. However, the Gospel writers stress that, as Servant of God, he was sent to establish justice on the earth and to become a light for the nations (see Isa 42:4 and 6). John writes of Greeks who were seeking Jesus; they were probably proselytes (converts to Judaism), because they had come up to worship at the feast (12:20-21). Their coming seemed to be a signal for Jesus that his "hour" had come. When Jesus was lifted up in his Death-and-Resurrection, he would draw all human beings to himself.

This effect of Jesus' work goes beyond the prophecy of Jeremiah, and points to the work of the Servant of God and to promises made to Abraham. At the same time, however, the fulfillment, complete with the surprises that go beyond the hopes of ancient teachers, does not invalidate the original call to the patriarchs and God's gift of the Covenant at Mount Sinai. Although Israel had broken the Covenant through the infidelity of many regarding its commandments (see Jer 31:32), God never revoked the call nor did he rescind the gift of the Covenant (see Rom 11:29). Through baptism, gentiles are joined with the descendants of Abraham; the nations enter God's plan in the marvelous process of being drawn into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus (see Galatians 3:26-29).