

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 20-21, 2021, Cycle B

Our Old Testament passage from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah talks about the Lord making a new covenant with the people! Jeremiah tells us: "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." "...this is the covenant that I will make..." says the Lord. "I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

One thing we have to understand is covenants are not contracts. Contracts can be very impersonal, spelling out legally binding duties and expectations. For example, you can sign a contract for a car loan without ever meeting the bank representative. A car loan contract is nothing personal between you and the bank. You can also sign apartment rental contracts and never meet the actual property owners. Covenants are different, though. Covenants are personal; covenants define relationships: I will be your God, and you shall be my people.

We Christians see the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah, as being fulfilled in Jesus – a covenant written on our hearts - or at least it should be written on our hearts. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, especially those 8 Beatitudes, reflect the inner transformation called for in the covenant – if we want to establish a true intimate relationship with God.

The challenge of the new covenant that comes through Jesus is interior conversion not external fulfillment of contractual obligations. Interior conversion means *obedience* to the will of God. The Letter to the Hebrews says, Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered." The word "obedience" comes from a Latin word "obedire" meaning "to listen". Every Lent we struggle to listen more clearly to the voice of God and live out God's will more fully.

Hopefully God's covenant becomes more part of us, etched deeper into our hearts and souls.

There is a scene in the movie "Dead Man Walking" where Sister Helen Prejean has a crucial conversation with the death row convict, Matthew Poncelet. Poncelet is an unrepentant, angry, arrogant man. Ironically, Poncelet thinks himself a Christian and tells Sister Helen that he is not afraid of dying. He says: "Me and God, we got all things squared away. I know Jesus died on the cross for us. And he's gonna be there when I appear before God on judgement day." Sister Helen responds: "Matt, redemption isn't some kind of free admission ticket that you get because Jesus paid the price. You've got to participate in your own redemption. You've got some work to do." Sr. Helen could see that Matt had not etched God's covenant on his heart.

We all got some work to do! The work to do is living God's covenant, etching God's covenant on our hearts. Etching God's covenant on our hearts is all about living the cross – dying to our selfish selves. In the Gospel passage this weekend Jesus says: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." "Whoever serves me must follow me..." "Where I am, there also will my servant be."

And where is Jesus? Jesus is traveling to the Cross! For Christians following Jesus that means we follow him to the cross. Dying to ourselves, we etch God's covenant deeply into our hearts thus producing "great fruit" as Jesus did. Here is the paradox: the covenant is given absolutely free as a gift (in other words, God freely shows us the path to redemption – resurrection), but redemption costs us nothing less than everything we are!