

I want to talk this morning about the biblical covenants, in particular about the relationship between the old covenant and the new. As you will know, for most of Christian history, it was believed that God has rejected the Jewish people, and so the old covenant had been abolished. In this view, God made a new covenant with the Church that took the place of the covenant with Israel.

So when you believe that God has rejected the Jewish people, then the relationship between the covenants is clear and simple: the first covenant does not exist any more and its place has been taken by the new covenant established by Jesus Christ. But in the last half-century more and more of the Christian churches have been recognising that God did not reject the Jewish people and that God's covenant relationship with Israel still remains in force. This became the official position of the Catholic Church in 1965 at the Second Vatican Council, and it has been clearly expressed more recently by the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Europe in their Leuenberg statement.

Once we say that the covenant with Israel remains in force, we have a new question to answer as Christians: **what is the relationship between the covenant with Israel and the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus?** I want to mention first what I believe to be a disastrously wrong answer to this question. This is what is sometimes called "two-covenant theology". This answer says that the first covenant with Israel is for Israel, and the second or new covenant is for the nations, the Gentiles, the non-Jews. [This answer makes Judaism and Christianity totally distinct religions. This has sometimes been expressed as each religion having its own identity and its own integrity.] This "two-covenant" theology finds no backing in the New Testament. It denies the constant teaching that Jesus is Saviour both of Jew and Gentile: e.g. "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4: 12, following mention in v. 11 of "the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth"), "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, **who gave himself as a ransom for all**" (1 Tim. 2: 5). It is also contradicted by the teaching of Paul in Romans, when he writes: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God **for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**" (Rom. 1: 16).

This "two-covenant" view is particularly found among theologians and scholars involved in the dialogue with the rabbis. They have become much more conscious of the suffering of the Jewish people throughout the ages at the hands of Christians and the Church. They have found out how Christian evangelism of Jews has led to profound suffering for the Jewish community. So this "two-covenant" theology is a theological justification for abandoning all Jewish evangelism.

How then should we understand the relationship between the covenants? Maybe we should look first at the clearest prophecy of the new covenant in the Old Testament. It is found in Jeremiah 31: 31: "Behold 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 repeated two verses later: "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jer. 31: 33). Here it is clear that the new covenant is

made with the same people as the first, not with a different people. But how do we explain the relationship between the two?

The present Pope, Benedict XVI, addressed this topic in a small book some years ago, before he became Pope. He argued that there is in effect only once covenant, and that the new is a renewal of the old. My own understanding is similar to this. The first principle is that the new covenant is foundationally established in Jesus himself. As the Word become flesh, as the Son of God, who has taken on a human nature, he expresses in his own being the union between God and man that is the heart of the covenant relationship. [This union between God and man in Jesus becomes definitive in his resurrection to glory.] So what is new in the new covenant is the newness of Jesus himself.

Secondly, Jesus identifies himself totally with his own people. His basic identity is expressed in the opening verse of Matthew's gospel: "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham." (Matt. 1: 1). In a profound sense, Jesus becomes Israel, the obedient son whom God has sought since the call of Abraham. This identification is hinted at in the servant passages in Isaiah. So in the first servant song in Isaiah 42, we read of the servant: "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." (v. 6). In general, Christians have understood that the servant is Jesus, whereas the rabbis have maintained that the servant is Israel. But this is an unnecessary choice. The servant is both Israel and Jesus, because Jesus is the perfect embodiment of Israel. In Isaiah 44: 21, not one of the servant songs, the servant is Israel. In the second song, we read: "And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'" (49: 3). Here the word Israel is in some but not all manuscripts.

In the New Testament, Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my father is the winemaker." (John 15: 1). This obviously has as its background the picture from Isaiah 5, where the Lord says, "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting." (Is. 5: 7). But it is at his baptism that the identification of Jesus with his people is seen most clearly. Here Jesus presents himself to John for baptism. But the baptism of John is "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3: 3). John himself immediately recognises the incongruity of the situation, that Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, should ask for this baptism of repentance from John, who was not sinless. So we are told, "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (Matt. 3: 14). But Jesus insists, saying, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting to fulfil all righteousness." (Matt. 3: 15). In other words, Jesus is identifying himself with his people as a whole in all their sinfulness, not just with the righteous. His baptism is an advance acceptance of his call to die for his people, because his immersion in the Jordan symbolized a death. And this for the fulfilment of all righteousness, that is for the deliverance of Israel and the world from sin, for the establishment of the kingdom of righteousness.

In fact, it is in the death and resurrection of Israel that Jesus himself is transformed, and thus in him Israel is transformed. The new covenant is established in his blood, which is not only shed on the cross but then presented to the Father (see the teaching of Hebrews on the high priesthood of Jesus). There is thus in this age of the Church a terrible separation within Israel between (1) Israel transformed in Yeshua, into whom the believers are baptised, and (2) Israel

refusing transformation in Yeshua, who nonetheless remained totally identified with his people.

That the Church is “transformed Israel” fits with the New Testament teaching on baptism in Romans 6, with the teaching on the olive tree in Romans 11, and with the teaching of Ephesians 2. First, Paul writes to the Romans, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Rom. 6: 3). Just as Jesus was transformed through his death and resurrection, so are we both included in him and transformed by being baptized into the death of Jesus. To be baptized into Messiah is to be incorporated into transformed Israel. In Romans 11, Paul compares the Jewish believers to the branches of a cultivated olive tree, whereas the Gentile believers are like the branches of a wild olive that have been grafted into the cultivated olive (vv. 17 – 24). In this comparison, the Jews who did not accept Jesus “were broken off because of their unbelief” (v. 20). In other words, the cultivated olive tree is the transformed Israel with its centre in Jesus himself. Even more explicit is the teaching in Ephesians 2, where the Gentile believers are reminded of their condition before their conversion (“separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise” v. 12) and later told of their new condition as Christians (“no longer strangers and sojourners, but ... fellow citizens [of Israel] with the saints and members of the household of God” v. 19). The Jewish believers were already part of the cultivated olive tree, and through faith in Yeshua and baptism into his death are part of transformed Israel, whereas the Gentile believers from being branches of a wild olive are grafted into transformed Israel through their baptism into the Messiah, who totally identified himself with his own people.

With this tragic separation within Israel between Jesus and the majority of his own people, there is a tremendous longing for healing and wholeness. The Jewish people continue to nourish the Messianic hope without knowing the identity of the Messiah, while Jesus longs to return to fulfil all God’s promises to his people. Paul prophesies that the time will come when “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11: 26). The hardening has come “upon part of Israel” for a time, that is “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom. 11: 25). Meanwhile Peter calls the “men of Israel” to “repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ [Messiah] appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke [to Israel] by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.” (Acts 3: 19 – 21).

This question of the relationship between the two covenants is not then just a fringe issue for theologians. It touches the heart of our faith. It concerns first the identity of Jesus himself, and our understanding of his identity and his mission. So it raises the challenging question: Is the Jesus we “know” the real Jesus, or do we have a mixed image of him – partly from the Scriptures, partly from replacing the Jewish Jesus by a Gentile Jesus? It affects our understanding of the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, because the Last Supper was a key moment in Jesus’s transformation of the covenant with Israel. Something similar applies to our understanding of the Twelve apostles, who were those Jesus chose to celebrate the Last Supper with.

We all need the light of the Holy Spirit to know the authentic Jewish Jesus, and to be freed of wrong understandings of the Scriptures that are a remnant of replacement thinking. “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of all believers with your light and your love, so that we can all find unity in the authentic Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world.”