

## Vanhoye Chapter 8

### The promise of a New Covenant

#### (Jer.31: 31-34)

The letter to the Hebrews establishes an intimate and original connection between priesthood and covenant. This connection, between priesthood and covenant was not noticeable in the Old Testament But in the New Testament, in Hebrews, the relationship between the priesthood of Christ, the high priest, and the New Covenant is very close. In Hebrews, Christ is called “*the mediator of New Covenant*” : ‘*This makes him the mediator of a new covenant, so that, now that a death has occurred to redeem the sins committed, under an earlier covenant, those who have been called to an eternal inheritance may receive the promise*’ (Heb.9:15)

The scripture basis for proclaiming Jesus as the ‘mediator of the new covenant is the oracle of Jeremiah chapter 31:31-34. Vanhoye suggests we meditate on this text.

*‘Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a New Covenant with house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 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 inscribe it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother saying: ‘Know the Lord, for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more”.* (Jer. 31:31-34)

*[The following paragraphs are from 'the 12<sup>th</sup> Presentation on Hebrew by Fr. Kieran O' Mahony O.S.A.]*

## **The Historical Background to this Promise of a New Covenant**

The Old Testament covenant spoken of in Hebrews is the covenant God made with Moses, the leader of the people, on Mount Sinai. This covenant was broken shortly afterwards when the people got impatient waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain. Perhaps, feeling he was lost, they made and worshiped the golden calf. But God forgave them and renewed the covenant with them. However this became the pattern of their relationship with God throughout their history. The people were unfaithful frequently but no matter how often the people were unfaithful God always forgave them and renewed the covenant with them. We will take a close look at the final example in this saga.

In 621 B.C.E 'the book of the Law' was rediscovered by Hilkiah and king Josiah ordered renewed the covenant before the Lord; he agreed to obey it and carry out the terms of the covenant. All the people then agreed to keep the covenant. (2Kings 23:3) But the effect of this renewal of the covenant did not last long. So king Josiah had a conversion with the prophet Jeremiah, who was also in touch with God, about the dire situation the people of Israel were in and instead of remaining the people of Judah even followed the life style obtaining in Israel. (Jer. 3:6-11)

## **The New Covenant**

The objective of both the Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant was the same; it was **that Yahweh would be their God and they would be his people.** But the means of achieving this objective was different.

The oracle of Jeremiah is an amazing initiative on the part of God; it is gratuitous and generous on his part. It is not the result of a bilateral agreement and a promise of reciprocal help as covenants usually were. And it was necessary because the covenant of Sinai was never faithfully kept by the chosen people. And while God had renewed that covenant, after each of their lapses in faithfulness, the terms of the renewed covenant had to be exactly as

they were in the original; the tables of stone had to be same type of stone, cut in the same way with the same words written on them.

While the renewals of the covenant laid emphasis on the sameness, the promise of a New Covenant in Jeremiah emphasised *newness* or difference. *I will make a New Covenant with house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers. By saying "new" he (God) has made the first old.* (Heb. 8:13)

### **What is the Newness of this Promised Covenant?**

There are four aspects of the covenant that make it new:

i) **It envisages an interior and not an exterior relationship;** it calls for and brings about a change or transformation of the heart. *I will put my law within them, and I will inscribe it upon their hearts;* (not on two tablets of stone; as an external cannot change the human heart. To have God's inscribed on one's own heart means having a docile heart capable of freely loving and obeying God.)

ii) **it envisages a relationship of perfect reciprocity between God and his people.** *I will be their God and they shall be my people.*(A heart to heart relationship will be possible when the human heart has changed and become docile.)

iii) **it will not be a collective institutional relationship with God but it will be a personal relationship of each person with God so admonitions will be superfluous.** *No longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother saying: 'Know the Lord, for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.* (The prophets gave plenty of admonitions in the Old Testament, for example Isaiah 1:3 *'the ox knows its master.... Jer.Is:3 'For they proceed from evil to evil....'* But the admonitions failed to bring about a conversion. And God had earlier predicted to Jeremiah saying: *"You shall speak all these words to them but they will not listen to you. You shall call to the them but they shall not answer you"*)[Jer. 7:27]

**iv) It will be founded on complete forgiveness of sins; *'for I will be merciful toward their evil deeds and their sins I will remember no longer'*.** (Jer.31:34)

This fourth aspect of the new covenant is the basis of the first three. This generous forgiveness shows the boundless fatherly love of God because at the time of Jeremiah forgiveness of the people's continued obstinacy and unfaithfulness. At one stage God forbade Jeremiah to intercede for the people: *'You, for your part, must not intercede for this people, nor raise either a plea or prayer on their behalf; do not plead with me for I will not listen to you.* (Jer.7:16)

It seemed to have been a situation of complete infidelity on the part of the people forgiveness on God's part seemed most unlikely. But humanly speaking God seems to have had second thoughts and again in his boundless generosity offers total forgiveness and a way forward in which each person will have a new and intimate relationship with him.

The way in which this extraordinary plan of God was revealed only at the Last Supper, at the institution of the Eucharist, when Jesus took the cup and said, "This is my blood of the Covenant". (Mt.26:28 Mark 14:24)

The New Covenant had to be established in blood, not in the blood of animals as the Mosaic Covenant was, but in the blood of Jesus, which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins". (Mt.26:28), according to the promise of the New Covenant, made by Jeremiah. *"and their sins I will remember no longer'*. (Jer. 31:34)

Let us meditate on this marvellous promise in the light of the Eucharist. Let us ask for the grace to truly receive this divine promise and experience all its extraordinary newness. We do not merit such a gratuitous, generous and merciful initiative of God. We live in the time of this New Covenant which renews us completely and establishes us in a profound and intimate relationship with God through Jesus, the Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant.

