

“Living God’s Saving Acts Today to Prepare Us for Eternity”

Mass for Wedding Anniversaries

February 20, 2016, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

Introduction

Imagine that you are living in Jerusalem around the year 622 B.C. It is a time of intense spiritual renewal, a “great awakening” among the Jewish people. The young king Josiah is zealous in his faith, and his enthusiasm is increased by the preaching of another young man, the prophet Jeremiah. Pagan shrines are being leveled and the Temple in Jerusalem is being rebuilt.

In the course of this repair work the high priest discovers a text of the Law in a storeroom and brings it to the king. It is a remarkable document, prompting the king to call the whole nation to a deeper form of repentance and a renewal of the Covenant. This is the Book of Deuteronomy, the final book of the Pentateuch, or Torah.

Historical Context

Deuteronomy relates the last will and testament of Moses, his final discourse to the people before they enter the Holy Land. It has an immediacy missing from the other four books of the Torah. Those books relate the historical events of the past, from the creation of the world to the establishment of God’s people in the Promised Land. Deuteronomy, in contrast, speaks in the present tense. The word “today” appears over fifty times in this book, whereas it is found only six times in all the other books of the Pentateuch. As the text is read out to the people gathered in Jerusalem in the year 622, they hear Moses speaking to them: “God made this Covenant not with our ancestors, but with us, with all of us alive here today” (Dt 5:3).

However, this insistence on the urgency of the present moment is not in the sense of “today” as being cut off from the past or having no sense of a future destiny. Rather, the present is situated in the context of God’s saving action for and among His people as revealed in their historical experience, and anticipates a destiny God is working to fulfill for them. Recall when this is all taking place: the ancient people of Israel had completed their forty years of wandering in the Sinai desert in search of the Promised Land after their miraculous release from slavery in Egypt. A lot happened in those forty years: they took a wrong turn and got lost; they rebelled against God, who punished them in order to purify them; God provided food, water, healing and direction for them when they cried out to Him in their need; He made a Covenant with them through Moses on Mount Sinai, to whom He gave the Law, the Torah, to be the outward sign of that Covenant. And all this after their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea as they fled from Egypt into freedom. Now, after all of this, they have finally reached their destination: they are at the Jordan River, about to cross over and enter into the Promised Land. Moses’ last, great discourse to God’s people, which Deuteronomy records, is at this tremendous pivotal moment of their history. What does he tell them?

Remember

He says a lot. But, it can all be summed up in one word: “Remember!” That is Moses speaking to the people of Israel), remember all these great signs that God worked for you; remember the Covenant He made with you; always keep in mind the destiny He has prepared for you. In the little snippet of this discourse that we heard in the first reading, he tells them to remember the formula of the Covenant: “Today you are making this agreement with the LORD: he is to be your God and you are to walk in his ways and observe his statutes, commandments and decrees, and to hearken to his voice. And today the LORD is making this agreement with you: you are to be a people peculiarly his own, as he promised you.”

Obeying the Lord’s “statutes, commandments and decrees” is the sign that they belong to Him; they are set apart by observing this higher law, a law not of human origin but that God Himself gave them. Remember, this land they are about to step into is already inhabited; they will now be living in the midst of pagan peoples who worship pagan idols. This law that their Lord has given them they must preserve for the sake of their own identity and for the sake of the world, for God and Israel *now belong to each other*.

This total self-gift between God and His people is the central mystery running through Israel’s history, and it is not surprising to find that throughout the Bible a favored image of this mutual self-giving is the love between husband and wife.

Old and New

We see here the meaning that these events that took place in the seventh century before Christ have for us as the disciples of Jesus, and especially for you who have come here today to renew your marriage vows.

That is, when we speak of the Old Testament and the New Testament, we mean an old Covenant and a new Covenant. But our new Covenant does not destroy the old one, it brings it to its completion. In Jesus Christ the mutual promises that bound God and the chosen people are now extended to all who profess faith in Christ. In Christ, we are spiritual descendants of Abraham and Moses; like those people gathered in Jerusalem centuries ago, we do not read sacred history as an account of past events, but as a description of present reality. Through the events of salvation history God prepared the world to welcome His Son, who in the fullness of time inaugurated a new and eternal Covenant, sealing it in his Blood.

This Covenant is the center of our lives as Catholics; it defines who we are. It is in light of this fact that you married couples should understand your high calling: in your vocation you literally embody the nuptial bond between Christ and his Bride, the Church. Saint Paul taught this explicitly. Writing to the Ephesians, he recalled the words at the very beginning of the Bible by which God instituted marriage: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two

shall become one flesh.” And then he says: “This is a great mystery, and I mean it in reference to Christ and the Church” (Eph 5:31-32).

Yours is a lofty vocation, a treasure to be cherished and a sacrament of love that is both human and divine. Human nature being what it is, we sometimes forget what is most important. This is why God’s people needed to solemnly renew their Covenant with the Lord; this is why it is a good thing for you to renew your marriage vows today. Certainly you have come to give thanks for the blessings God has given to you as a couple, and through you to many others. You have come to repent for those times in the past when your love, which should be entirely centered on God and be expressed in love for your spouse, has not been all that it is called to be. But above all, you come to celebrate this “today”: this moment to recall God’s commitment to you as a couple, and to express your desire as husband and wife to give yourselves to Him with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Biblical Memory

And just like God’s people of old, also for you that “today” is rooted in the past and anticipates the future. You remember the past, most especially that solemn moment when you vowed your lives to each other on your wedding day, but also everything that led up to it. These are the saving events of God in your own lives, such that your eternal destinies now irrevocably intertwined with each other. This is not just a past memory, though; it is lived out here and now as a consequence of all that history, and is oriented toward preparing you for eternity.

Moses’ commandment to God’s people of old, “remember,” remains pertinent to us today, and especially to you as married couples. But this remembering is not simply fondly reminiscing over events of the past; rather, Biblical memory means living in the present moment, “today,” who we are as God’s people, and each one of us living who we are individually according to our vocation and response to God’s call in our life, in anticipation of the eternal destiny God has prepared for us.

Notice the teaching of our Lord in today’s Gospel: it is very high, a very demanding teaching – love of enemies and prayer for persecutors. Jesus always demands more from his followers; this is the higher law of love that shows that we belong to him. Marriage is a school of love, teaching the spouses in myriad practical ways how to be giving, training you so that you might reach the level of pure altruistic love. So: “remember.” Remember who you are as husband and wife; remember the day you exchanged your marriage vows, which was really God’s great act of salvation in your lives; remember to live in accordance with God’s supernatural purpose for marriage, modeling His love for His people.

Conclusion

You come today to renew your vows before the altar. How fitting! In every celebration of the Eucharist the one saving sacrifice of Christ, the new and eternal

Covenant, is renewed. The Eucharist is, par excellence, Biblical remembering: Christ's one perfect sacrifice, by which he redeemed us and reconciled us to his Father, is made present on the altar, in the here and now, in anticipation of our sharing in his eternal banquet table in heaven. This is the sacrifice by which he sealed the new and eternal Covenant in his blood, espousing his Church to himself. He is our God, and we are his people; *we belong to each other*.

In a few moments you will stand and renew that commitment by which you vowed yourselves to belong to each other for the rest of your lives. You know your own flaws better now than you did on your wedding day, and you know the flaws of your spouse as well (and he or she knows yours!). How could it be otherwise, living day in and day out with one another? But do not think about those limitations as you renew your vows today. Think instead of the Lord Jesus, for it is he who is speaking in you: let his perfect love make up for what is lacking; let him love and be loved in your marriage bond. Long ago he transformed water into wine at a wedding feast; let him continue the miracle by which he transforms your human love for each other into the sacrament of his divine love.

SUMMARY IN SPANISH:

En nuestra primera lectura de la Misa de hoy, oímos del libro de Deuteronomio, que contiene el discurso final de Moisés al pueblo de Israel después de los cuarenta años de vagar en el desierto de Sinaí. En este momento están a punto de entrar en la tierra prometida, el destino que Dios había preparado para ellos. Moisés les dice muchas cosas, pero todo lo que dice en realidad puede ser resumido en una sola palabra: recuerda! Es decir (Moisés hablando al pueblo de Israel), recuerda las grandes cosas que el Señor hizo por ustedes en acompañarlos a esta herencia que les había preparado. Y tenían que hacerlo sobretodo observando la ley que Él les había dado por medio de Moisés, la señal de la alianza que hizo con ellos: ellos son su pueblo, y Él es su Dios. Ahora se pertenecen el uno al otro.

El mandamiento de Moisés al pueblo de Dios de antaño, "recuerda," sigue siendo pertinente para nosotros hoy en día, y de modo particular para los esposos. Pero este recordar no significa simplemente rememorar los acontecimientos del pasado con cariño; más bien, la memoria bíblica significa vivir en el momento presente, "hoy en día," lo que somos como pueblo de Dios.

Y así, al igual que la gente de Dios de antaño, también para ustedes este "hoy" tiene sus raíces en el pasado y anticipa el futuro. Ustedes recuerdan el pasado, muy especialmente ese momento solemne en que juraron a sus vidas el uno al otro en su día de la boda, pero también todo lo que condujo a ella. Estos son los acontecimientos salvíficos de Dios en sus propias vidas, de tal manera que sus destinos eternos ahora están irrevocablemente entrelazados entre sí. Pero esto no es sólo un recuerdo del pasado; se vive aquí y ahora como consecuencia de toda esa historia, y está orientado hacia la preparación para la eternidad.

Por lo tanto: “recuerda.” Recuerdan quienes son como marido y mujer; recuerdan el día en que intercambiaron sus votos matrimoniales, que era realmente un gran acto de salvación de Dios en sus vidas; recuerdan que deben vivir de acuerdo con la finalidad sobrenatural de Dios para el matrimonio, modelando el amor de Dios por su pueblo.