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The why of the cross

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The covenant God shares with humanity is poignantly featured in today?s sacred texts. Scholars have acclaimed this covenant as the central and definitive theological affirmation of both the Hebrew and the Christian testaments. At once a theological idea, a liturgical rite and an enduring public institution, the covenant underscores God?s abiding commitment to a people who are too often less than faithful.

John 12:20-33

Full text of the readings

In their descriptions of the covenant between God and the Israelites, the ancient authors relied upon the structure of Hittite suzerainty treaties. The covenanting partners were named; beneficial actions done by the greater party on behalf of the lesser party were recited; stipulations were listed and agreed upon; witnesses were called forth; blessings and curses were exacted depending upon the loyalty, or not, of the contracting parties. [1] When the Israelites adopted this structure, it was God who took the initiative and God whose mighty deeds on behalf of Israel made them who they were: ?I will be your God; you will be my people,? ?It was I who called you forth from Egypt to give you a land? (Exodus 19:4-6, 20:2). Similarly, it was God who gave the gift of the law (God did not impose it) to govern the relationship between God and the Israelites (Exodus 20:3-23:33). Covenants between God and Israel were often sealed by the sacrifice of an animal, whose blood was offered to expiate sin and whose flesh was cooked and shared as a sign of communion between God and Israel (Exodus 24:9-11).

Several such covenants were made and broken throughout Israel?s history, but the covenant promised by Jeremiah (first reading) is unconditional and everlasting. Unlike the stipulations of previous covenants, which were carved in stone, the terms of the covenant envisioned by Jeremiah would be recorded in the human heart, and all, from least to greatest, would be privileged to know God. This covenant would also bring forgiveness of sins. Humankind would be forever free of guilt, for God would remember their sins no more.

Although the people longed to experience the covenant of Jeremiah?s promise, it was only through Jesus and through his embrace of the cross that this covenant was realized. To signal the importance and necessity of the cross, today?s Gospel features the Johannine Jesus declaring that his hour has come, at long last. Jesus? hour -- his raison d?être, the purpose for which he came into the world -- was to establish, solidify and ratify the new and eternal covenant Jeremiah promised centuries before. This Jesus did by revealing God in human flesh and blood and by enunciating, in his every word and deed, the love God has for sinners. Love of God and love for one another became the law by which this covenant would stand.

To seal this bond of unending love, Jesus offered himself in sacrifice. Just as a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, Jesus gave himself for the life of the world. He offered himself to be lifted up on the cross so that through the gift of his suffering, and by his blood, sinners would be forgiven. Jesus agreed to the cross and all its consequences so that you and I might live and know the love of God.

We are challenged to accept the cross -- this symbol of ignominy and hate -- as an expression of the purest, truest love humankind will ever experience. What do we say in response to such a love? It calls forth more than words; it summons a celebration. Through the sacred remembrance of every eucharistic gathering, we celebrate the new and eternal covenant. Jesus is present in word, in spirit, in sacrifice, in communion and in the assembly who has come together in his name. All present recall his hour, his raison d?être; all are graced by his fidelity to God and God?s purpose. Then, in God?s good presence, we eat the bread that Jesus gave so that we too may be blessed, broken and shared with all who hunger for the communion we have been privileged to know and share.

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/032512-fifth-sunday-of-lent.cfm