

# A Covenant to the People

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Says the prophet:

I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations. (Isaiah 42:6)

How, though, did the man who first summoned Israel to this vocation understand her mission?

Ironically, he was writing at a time when the very future of Israel's identity as a people was most in jeopardy. Forty years before she had suffered humiliating defeat by the Babylonians. Her temple was destroyed and her leaders, together with the king, exiled in heathen Babylon. The first prophet of the exile, Ezekiel, had assured his fellow captives that if they remained faithful to their God they would be restored to their land. But nothing had happened and, as the generation which had gone into exile died off, it seemed that God had totally abandoned his people.

Then suddenly a second prophet sounded his triumphant message:  
Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned. (Is. 40 : 1—2))

But he was not just content to proclaim Israel's return to her land: he saw her as the agent by whom the whole world would be brought under God's rule. Her restoration was not just to vindicate God's people, to allow them fellowship with him irrespective of what went on elsewhere in his world. Rather it was to be a light to the nations.

But what did the prophet mean by being a light? He makes this clear; Israel is to achieve this role by bringing forth justice to the nations:

He will not fail or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law. (Is. 42 : 4)

Justice—*mishpat*; law—*torah*: these are the concepts which will transform the world. It is the establishment of those right relations which

law ensures that will result in that harmony and peace which in prophetic language leads men to beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. In passing sentence on Jesus, Pilate might equally have asked, what is justice?

While originally the Hebrew word *torah*—law—meant a ruling or instruction on a specific question, within the Old Testament itself it comes to be understood as a collection of teaching which expresses the complete will of God for his people. It therefore extended far beyond mere legal prescriptions, to cover the whole history of God's dealing with his people, their very election and salvation. In other words, God's will does not merely consist of certain rules which must be obeyed under threat of judgement: God's will is that he has chosen a people through whom he will make himself known to all peoples. The only thing that can thwart his plan is his people's lack of faith.

*torah*, then, far from being an object of fear, is for the Jews their most treasured possession and source of continual joy and thanksgiving. It indicates that God wills to know man, to disclose his nature and character to him, that man made in his image may co-operate with that love and so bring about that kingdom which was God's intention at creation and to which all man's endeavours must be directed. The goal of *torah* is the establishment of that perfect order which God's justice alone can achieve and which leads, as Isaiah saw, to that rule of peace in which even wild and domestic animals lie down together and children play in safety by snakes' nests. Israel's task was so to mirror that community of peace that, like moths coming to a light, the nations would be drawn to Jerusalem, there to be taught *torah*, God's will. It is this role as a light to the nations that the Church has inherited. How can she fulfil it?

The Hebrews reached their cosmic vision of law working from the particular to the general. They built up a collection of rulings which through the centuries enabled them more fully to be the people of God. Although to give it a proper pedigree all law was accredited to Moses, nowhere in the Old Testament is it claimed that he was its author. It was revealed to him by God himself, and like all law reflects the aims and priorities of the legislator. As can be seen from the Ten Commandments, Hebrew law had from its inception a double purpose: to secure order between God and man, and man and his neighbour. Hence the Hebrews made no distinction between that mass of cultic laws about sacrifice and ritual, and the criminal and civil law enforceable through the courts. Both were intended to secure for society *shalom*, peace and harmony.

But Hebrew law went far beyond that which was legally enforceable. It recognised the limitations of the courts in being able to secure justice and righteousness between men. For instance, there were those who had no legal rights, whose welfare depended entirely on charity—the widow, orphan and the resident alien. It was easy enough to exploit them. But

such action could hardly be held to reflect the compassionate nature of Israel's God, characterised in his election of an obscure band of captive slaves to be his chosen people. Then there were the poor—those who for some reason or another were again forced to depend on others if they were to survive. The law provided that not only were they entitled as of right to interest-free loans from their neighbour, but that these loans were themselves to be cancelled if incapable of repayment. For the Hebrews rightly recognised the inevitable disorder that poverty brings. Widespread disparity of wealth can only lead to growing discontent and eventually to conflict and violence. Of such a society the prophets were to bear eloquent witness.

Indeed, there appears to be no limit to the sphere of charity demanded by Hebrew law. It extended to sustaining travellers on their journeys, to protecting animals, and even to giving human rights to that most despicable of all classes, slaves. And this right to charity was based on one essential premise, that life mattered more than possessions—that people were more important than property.

The protection of personal property was, then, no overriding interest of Hebrew law. All property was held in trust for the welfare of the community at large, and therefore those who had insufficient were entitled to claim from those who had enough. For common to all was a right to luxuriate in the land of milk and honey which God had given to them. Charity, which in Hebrew law was no optional extra but a positive duty, was then part of law because it helped to restore that order which God willed and law maintained. Of course, it could not be spelled out in every detail: men had to make their own moral judgements. But in so far as they failed to use their means to bring about *shalom*, they broke *torah*.

It should always be remembered, as Hebrew law itself reminds us, that ironically the most effective agent of disorder can be law itself. If the community cannot rely on a fair and impartial administration of justice, if it cannot get its complaints heard, then the law, however fair, cannot bring about order. Where any section of society feels that this is the case, then those responsible for the administration of law should take their complaints very seriously indeed, for were they to gain ground, then the whole fabric of justice would be placed in peril to the detriment of us all. For in the end law rests on the consent of the people. The alternative is rule by the gun. Of that the world provides abundant evidence.

It was the prophet's task to remind Israel that her way of life was to mirror the divine nature revealed through her laws. Her election depended not only on the faithful practice of her religion, but also on her attitudes to those who had no means of protecting themselves. Cultic practices, no matter how zealously performed, could only rebound as sin on the worshippers' heads, if their subsequent action showed the shallowness of their faith. For conditional to any worship of God was

observance of his laws. *Shalom*, peace and harmony, between God and man is impossible where no peace and harmony exists between man and his neighbour. God will not permit religious practice to act as a cloak to hide society's ills. Episcopal appeals to the nation, if they are to be prophetic—and how this nation needs her prophets—must concern not only cultic observance but basic economics which ensure righteousness and justice among men. The law, that which is enforceable in the law courts, is only the tip of the iceberg. The mass of lawlessness lies beneath the waters in the social conditions and material values of our society. Here lies our disorder and this is nothing to the disorder of the world at large, imprisoned by unjust economic structures. *Torah* does not simply require an individual response of personal charity, important as this may be, but demands of the community at large the eradication of all that is politically, economically and socially unjust. Bob Geldof rightly redefines the demands of law for us all.

For the Hebrews, then, law was an expression of God's love: he was not some remote being uninterested in their affairs. Rather, he was concerned to ensure that in their daily dealings one with another that love which characterised his own choice of them should be shown to all with whom they came into contact. For the Hebrews law and love were not contradictory principles, but a joint expression of God's concern for man. No wonder the psalmist could exult:

O how I love thy law!

It is my study all day long.

(119 : 97)

The tension between law and love only arises when men choose to rely on law and forget the expression of love which is behind it, love which in the end can never be reduced to a system of legal practice. By making charity part of the Hebrew law, the Hebrews in effect made law open-ended. Further, since law is an expression of God's love, love of God and love of one's neighbours naturally belong together. Religious practice of itself cannot secure man's acceptability before God: 'Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven'. But neither can humanism ever secure that ordered humanity to which that ideal is pledged. For, in seeking to effect a just order without God, men will inevitably be consumed at worst by envy and jealousy, at best with righteous indignation, and take action to remedy what they consider wrong. Against such violence the only ultimate protection is the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty.

*torah*, then, is not just a matter of stopping mugging and vandalism, important as that may be: it is about the coming of the Kingdom. Nor can it be concerned solely with securing man's protection: the gospel of the cross is not about safety. Nor is the gospel about settling down: it is about a journey, a journey whose destination is that transformation of

all we at present know and which can only be described in apocalyptic language.

Who then, which of our institutions, confronted by all this will hear our Lord's injunction, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness—hunger and thirst to see right prevail? The answer is, those who take *torah* seriously—that God has created for man paradisaic bliss and will not let him go till that goal is achieved. Blessed, then, are those who in spite of so much that is hopeless have not lost hope in that eschatological Kingdom. Blessed are those who still have the courage to light the flame of faith. Blessed are those who are prepared to risk all, to suffer for righteousness, as they confront the powers of darkness. For the only ultimate threat to *torah* is when men no longer pray, pray with passion, 'Thy kingdom come'.

## **To be a Sociologist and a Catholic: A Reflection**

**Kieran Flanagan**

The total number of Catholic sociologists in Great Britain could fit comfortably at the back of the Clapham omnibus. Among the many exotic ideological species of sociologists, the feminists, the cat fanciers, and the vegetarians, it is reasonable to assume a believing Catholic could be found somewhere. Those found seem to occupy a peculiar ideological limbo, their religious and sociological gaze doomed to be misunderstood by Church and discipline alike. This tiny band of sociological hoppers forms a dispersed breed, invisible in their own Church, and for some, best kept so; within their discipline, they seem as a holy huddle on a tiny rock discernable in a sea of analytical uncertainty, odd, but interesting. Doubtless every occupation carries a burden, a witness to a calling out of improbable circumstances.

Although some sociologists wear their ideological beliefs heavily in public, most carry their burdens privately. Few biographies of sociologists have been written, and even fewer about those who are also Catholic. Sociologists are a reticent breed, and theologically they are

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