E.IV_2004_12_10

Erzbischof Dr. Rowan Williams

Lecture at Jewish-Christian Relations Centre

'The place of Covenant in Judaism, Christianity and Jewish-Christian relations'

2004 organisierte das Elijah Interfaith Institute eine Konferenz in Jerusalem zum Thema „"The place of Covenant in Judaism, Christianity and Jewish-Christian relations" vom 8.-12. Juli 2004. Die Rede von Rowan Williams, Erzbischof von Canterbury (2002-2012) befasst sich mit der Frage, ob es einen oder mehrere Bundesverträge gibt. Es gibt zwei relevante Stellen in den Briefen des Apostels Paulus, die darauf hinweisen, dass die Idee mehrerer Bundesverträge nur im Kontext der israelitischen Geschichte gesehen werden kann. Williams argumentiert, dass der mosaische Bund, obwohl er in gewisser Weise das Ziel des Bundes mit Abraham behindert hat, den Bund mit Israel nicht relativiert. Der mosaische Bund wird eher als ein Teil der Geschichte des Volkes Gottes gesehen, der in Verbindung mit den Verheißungen an Abraham steht. Williams erklärt weiterhin, dass der Glaube an Jesus als den Messias die Erfüllung der Verheißung an Abraham bedeutet. Das mosaische Gesetz wird nun als Ausdruck des Lebens Jesu verstanden, der dem Leben der Gläubigen moralische und spirituelle Orientierung gibt.

Keywords: Anglikanische Kirche, Theologie, Judentum, Bund Gottes

The following is the text of a lecture given at a conference on 'The place of Covenant in Judaism, Christianity and Jewish-Christian relations' by the Most Revd Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury

Two Covenants or one?

Hardly ever in Hebrew or Christian Scripture do we find the word 'covenant' in the plural. There are two relevant instances in Paul - Rom.9.4 and Gal.4.24: the former strongly suggests that the notion of a plurality of covenants is only applicable within a basic continuity of Israelite history; the latter, more problematically, connects the Mosaic covenant with Hagar the slave, but again appeals to a continuity in the story of the people of God, rooted in the promises to Abraham. The Mosaic law, Paul claims, has issued in slavery, or becomes a slavery when chosen in full and conscious opposition to the freedom now offered. But it would be misreading this passage - controversial as it undoubtedly is - to treat it as relativising the covenant with Israel as such. Its point is that the Mosaic covenant has in some way (against its own true nature or purpose, if we want to relate this to Paul's discussion in Romans 7) frustrated the goal of the covenant with Abraham; it has failed to produce the free children of Abraham who receive and begin to realise the promises of God in the world.

So the Galatians passage should not be read as implying that a radically different covenant has appeared in order to supersede the fundamental covenant with Abraham and Isaac. The Mosaic covenant - or at least its effects in actual history - must be understood in the context of the prior covenant with Abraham, and no interpretation of

the Torah will be acceptable in Paul's eyes that diminishes the potential universal perspective of the Abrahamic promise. If the Torah is used as a means of defending a 'true' Israel against contamination by the non-circumcised, it will not liberate but enslave. So for a Christian believer like Paul, the promise to Abraham is now fulfilled in Jesus; the Torah is provided in order to identify what sin and betrayal of the covenant looks like - and in Paul's eyes, the coming of Jesus as Messiah has shown that when he is present his Spirit exposes evil and sin in a way that at the very least alters the function of Torah. It was never meant to define the terms of the covenant positively and exclusively; and it no longer needs to be used in order to expose sin. Its substance is still holy and good, and still to be observed, but simply as the expression of the life of the indwelling Jesus, who gives moral and spiritual shape to the believer's life, whether circumcised or uncircumcised.

Christian theology can be misled by the language of more than one covenant or of the 'new' covenant mentioned in Jesus' eucharistic words. The concept of a new covenant first appears as a move internal to the discourse of Israel itself. Classically, in Jer.31, it is seen as something that makes the doing of God's will instinctive to God's people; it does not revise the very idea of there being such a thing as God's people, but looks to a condition in which the freedom of divine forgiveness and restoration somehow makes the knowledge of God a matter of the natural motions of the heart. So far from challenging the notion of a covenant people, the passage in Jeremiah reinforces the conviction of an unbreakable alliance; as in 33.20 ff., the covenant with Israel is set alongside the 'covenant' that assures the succession of seasons or of light and darkness. The existence of God's people is as much a part of an abiding natural order, a cosmos, as any feature of the natural world - indeed, more dependable and fixed than the natural world, if we recall Isaiah 54.10.

But to focus on this theme gives us a way in to understanding a bit more deeply what covenant itself is all about. If (as Jeremiah implies) the covenant is seen at its strongest and most complete when there is lasting knowledge of God in the hearts of the people, we could say that the covenant exists so that God may be known. The fidelity of God to God's promises, which is the fundamental reality of covenant, shows what sort of God the God of Israel is - a dependable God, whose relations with human creatures are as assured and consistent as his relations with the order of the world. Faithfulness to Israel in all its historical vicissitudes, triumphs and failures, is shown to be of a piece with the wisdom that sustains the cosmos. Just as, in the sapiential books of Hebrew Scripture and the Apocrypha, God's wisdom makes it possible to understand the world as a coherent whole, so the conviction of covenant fidelity makes it possible to understand the history of Israel as a whole, as one story. And the strong implication that we find in the prophetic tradition, especially Second Isaiah, is that it therefore also makes it possible to understand human history itself as one story, moving towards an eschatological climax where all nations join in celebrating God's fidelity at the shrine on Mount Zion.

Thus the existence of the covenant people is an embodied sign communicating the nature of God as wholly to be depended upon, wholly committed to the work he has begun, loyal to his purpose of peace and abundance for all creation. As Walter Brueggemann argues in his Theology of the Old Testament (pp.418 ff.), it is completely misleading to speak of an 'unconditional' covenant with Abraham replaced by a 'conditional' one with Moses. Covenant from the beginning has consequences for the human parties involved: the Abrahamic covenant makes Abraham's kin a blessing to

the nations, and assumes that the visible sign of circumcision establishes a visible presence for God in the world in marking off this people as obedient. 'As in any serious relationship of love, the appropriate response to love is to resonate with the will, purpose, desire, hope and intention of the one who loves' (420). God's purpose is to bless the nations of the earth; so the fact of Israel's existence must in some way be a concrete source of blessing. It cannot be reduced to a mechanical sustaining of the people's identity alone.

And that rootedness in God's clear purpose relates the existence of Israel to more comprehensive hopes for the created world. In the days to come, Israel, restored to faithfulness, will benefit from God making a covenant with the wild beasts to secure her peace (Hos.2.20); as if, once God's people has learned faithfulness to their faithful partner, peace will be restored within the natural order (c.f. the promises of Isaiah 11). Israel's restored faithfulness makes possible a fuller realisation of God's wisdom, ordering creation towards harmony. The fact of the covenant is irreducibly a fact of promise for all: God is to be depended upon for the future of the human world and the cosmos. It is not that the immediate future is guaranteed to be safe or easy, but that the character and purpose of God do not alter. For God's people to go on saying and believing this and acting upon its truth is for them to be an effective 'sacramental' word to the whole human world. Even when this fidelity is absent, God's partnership is unaffected; and the manifest disorientation and grief of a people who have wandered from their calling may yet be a sign of God's unswerving commitment, a sort of negative image (as in the regular Deuteronomic and prophetic trope of the wonder of the nations at the desolation of Israel or Jerusalem).

Early Christian reflection, above all in Paul, faces an obvious challenge, and Paul, in Romans 9-11, tackles it head-on. The covenant cannot but be seen as having altered in some drastic way if God's people are now to be defined as those who unite in trust that God has accepted them through the death of the Anointed. But the whole idea of a covenanting God is undermined if this means a rejection of the history of the covenant thus far. God does not change; so there has to be a sense in which the covenant does not change either. And Paul, in Romans and Galatians, seems to be saying that what faith in Jesus as Messiah means is that nothing else now expresses with the same 'sacramental' force the self-consistency of God. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the covenant is sealed with blood, meaning that the ultimate repudiation of faithfulness by human beings is overcome by God's faithfulness to his promises. <u>But this in turn means</u> that God's proclamation in the resurrection that his promises are indestructible implies a continuing role for the original covenant people. Whatever the import of the new dispensation, it cannot abolish this. In Romans, Paul has to struggle passionately with all this, so as to be able to say that the Church somehow exists to call Israel back to its own vocation, not to replace it with a new and disconnected vocation.

It is important to remember that in the context of Romans Paul is addressing a new and vulnerable Christian community and (indirectly) a long-established and ideologically powerful Jewish community. The weak challenges the strong here, when the strong, the governing classes of Second Temple Jewish society, show themselves indifferent to the call to realise and to offer the divine promise of a universal covenanted peace. But the question that Christians have failed to follow up from this is what is at issue when the Church is the ideologically strong, exclusive, established partner. It is possible to use Romans and other Christian scriptural texts in a way that is in fact

opposed to their original sense. For the Christian to define Jewishness as superseded, in the context of a Christianised society, is for the Christian to take up the role of the hostile and exclusive Jewish ideologue envisaged by Paul as his opponent. And the further implication is that the marginal or powerless community in this setting has the freedom and the duty to challenge the majority community as to whether it is fulfilling a covenantal obligation to embody the promise of peace. If Paul is right in refusing the apparently easy solution of a fresh and different covenant, abolishing everything about the first, those who are in diverse ways involved in the history of the one covenant are rightly challenging of each other in the name of the ultimate goal of God's covenantal action. Paul can say that the Israel he confronts, or its ideological managers, have made the promise unattainable by a misprision of what the Torah is about; but is it not then open, when history has done so much so violently to reverse the relationship, for the Jew to say the same of the Christian ideologue? The Jew may want to charge the Christian with undermining the whole point of the covenantal story by acting and speaking as though the covenant celebrated by Christians had been substituted for that with the Jewish people, thus suggesting that God does not keep faith and that we cannot hope for him to make one story of our diverse human histories.

There is a further turn to this argument, bearing on the most difficult area of relation today between Jews and non-Jews. In the context of modern political Israel, is it not the powerless who have the freedom and the duty to ask the hard questions of the state of Israel? What does the concrete power of Israeli government, in relation to the poorest and most disadvantaged of its own population and its Palestinian neighbours, say or fail to say about the purpose of covenant? It is difficult for Christians to raise such a question in any way that suggests they have earned the freedom to do so; but they may, as critical friends, accepting for themselves all the challenges that Jews will put to them, still want to guarantee that the question of the least powerful is heard. If the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is cast in terms that, in one way or another, take for granted a sort of conditionality about the identity or legitimacy of Israel as a people, the challenge from the marginal or oppressed is almost impossible to hear, because it carries a sort of threat to Israel's existence as an ethnic or political unit. Christians have to tread with caution; but if they are clear about Israel's calling and their own involvement in one history with them, a history of wrestling with God, they may yet be able to help the questioning process. This entire subject is bedevilled by the recurrent spectre of supersessionism, a sort of dangerous haziness that merges the question of the legitimacy of the modern state of Israel with the (theologically doubtful, as I have said above) idea of a conditional covenant with Moses. But what could be achieved here by a Jewish Christian dialogue that worked hard at a common understanding of covenant as promise, as the effective sign or sacrament of God's peace? We have a great deal of work to do if we are to do justice both to the abiding reality of a covenant with one particular people, whose identity is 'held' by God, and to the manifest and appalling injustices that the Palestinian people suffer and which are sometimes minimised or even justified through narrow and self-interested versions of theological convictions about the covenant.

A common understanding is nonetheless unlikely to solve the implacable problems that always lie at the heart of our relationship - the problems addressed so shrewdly and provocatively by Bishop Richard Harries in his recent book, After the Evil. Is there a role for Jewish Christians who remain culturally distinctive, Torah-practising Jews? Should Christians try to convert Jews at all? Is there reconciliation possible between Christians and Jews in the wake of the Shoah? How can and should a Jew regard

Jesus? These debatable issues, though, do not mean that there can be no convergence on the actual nature of covenant - and, it may be, on the recognition of the necessary unity and finality of God's action in establishing it. If Jews and Christians can agree that covenant is a means of making God known as faithful, that it is inseparable from the 'covenant' of the natural order, and so, in Hebrew terms, from God's character as Wisdom, and that it therefore constitutes a sign of promise, the promise that history, like the order of nature, can in spite of all be read as one narrative in relation to God, then there is a good deal to discuss. Not least, this agreement sets Christians and Jews alongside each other in resisting certain distortions of religious faith. Both repudiate a picture of God in which the divine is thought of as arbitrary or capricious; both want to hold together God's dealings with the natural order and his dealings with humanity; both would thus see the moral world as grounded in the nature of things, not in convenience or self-development, and both would have to reject any notion that God's purpose in human history varied from age to age or from context to context.

This is not insignificant. The things that I have suggested Jews and Christians necessarily oppose together are not without their defenders. There are fundamentalists of all faith backgrounds for whom God is first and foremost an omnipotent but irrational will, a powerful and violent presence, rather than a personal agency whose acts flow from his nature and who is not diverted from his purpose by events or feelings - however the chances of history and its appalling tragedies make it hard to see at times how this can be true (hence the laments and reproaches of so much of Hebrew Scripture). There are those who cannot accept the idea of a human nature that is frustrated or damaged by certain sorts of behaviour, as though moral decision was always a negotiation of interests. There are those who are not particularly concerned about the idea that there is one convergent good for human beings, one ultimate standard of justice and respect. In other words, without a covenantal theology, we are in danger of various sorts of irrationalism, of romantic illusions about human nature and will, and of delusive and oppressive ideas about the good society and the peaceful world. The Christian supersessionist may not know it but s/he pays a high price for doubting the coherence of God's work. The virtually insoluble problems already mentioned are a theological burden, but at least they do not imprison us in dangerous illusions about God and humanity.

The burden is simply that of acknowledging the untidiness of theoretical resolutions in this area. The Christian cannot, I have argued, simply take up a two covenant model for which either there are two successive and divergent acts of God, one taking over from the other, or there are two parallel 'tracks' for God's dealings with us, having slightly different goals. What the Jew would want to say of either option, I don't know; but I suspect that, in spite of the attractiveness to some Jewish thinkers of the Rosenzweig model of two parallel dispensations, similar problems will ultimately arise if we have to take seriously belief in a single divine purpose for covenant that has a universal horizon. Would a Jewish proponent of a two covenant theory want to say that the Church is God's tool for giving Gentiles some kind of share in divine wisdom and justice independently of relation to the people of Israel?

But all this still raises a spectre typical of modern anxieties over particularism. However the sort of theology here outlined is finally phrased, in predominantly Christian or predominantly Jewish terms, it continues to suppose that God's faithfulness to creation, including human creation, can only be made accessible and intelligible through the

history of one people - and finally, for the Christian, one person. The deep modern unhappiness with what is seen as a confusion between contingent historical facts and truths about the divine nature, the supposed confusion that so disturbed Lessing, is likely to focus upon these claims as arbitrary and productive of merciless and unreasoning conflict. Surely what we have here is precisely what is so unacceptable about 'revealed' religion: claims that cannot be argued in general terms but simply stake a position upon a local narrative.

And this is where all biblically based faith disagrees. How does the God of all creation establish his nature so that the world can discern it? We may say that he shows his character in the order of the universe - as indeed both Judaism and Christianity assert. But a divine concern with the order of the universe does not in itself translate immediately to the moral order; how do we move from the circling planets to the idea that God's nature is most fully reflected in creation by a morally coherent life, a life marked by law, by regularity and justice, by the paying of reverence to another as a subject who is equally related to the maker of all things and bears the maker's image? How else, say the biblical religions, but by a record of events that display the coherence of the maker's action in respect of human persons and communities? The faithfulness of God has to be displayed in testimony. Walter Brueggemann, in the book already referred to, describes the interplay in Hebrew Scripture between what he calls testimony and countertestimony - between the triumphant gratitude that celebrates God's commitment and the agonised doubt and protest that can see only 'absence and silence' and articulates God's 'hiddenness, ambiguity, and negativity' (p.400). In the long record of Israel's history, God is found to be faithful, because the people remains, the language, for all its inner arguments, is still one process, one utterance. And finding God to be faithful implies moments and dimensions in the story where Israel has to labour to go on saying the same thing, and is capable of protesting at that labour and coming to the edge of abandoning the conversation with God. The absence is taken up into the whole narrative - as so often in the Psalms, as in Lamentations, as in the dialectic in Hosea between God's impulse to abandon the unfaithful partner and God's self-recognition as compulsively merciful.

Only a story of historical continuity through extraordinary vicissitudes can do this job. God invests, as we might say, his credibility in the historical survival of Israel; he does not establish his trustworthiness by some sort of general revelation or even through an accumulation of individual experiences of covenanted fidelity, but by the call of a people, whose identity is dramatically and perpetually vulnerable. It is a people whose story begins in wandering and homelessness; and God establishes his credibility by promising them a land and bringing them to it. The covenant people of scriptural narrative is a people whose territorial integrity is always being renegotiated and whose political unity is disastrously fractured almost at the moment of their greatest success; a people whose identity in the period when the final form of much of the scriptures is being settled is bound up with the experience of deportation and exile. No accumulation of individual experience can say what this history says.

And nothing can replace it or - in any straightforward sense - universalise it. This people finally encounters its greatest challenge so far: it generates a sect whose irreversible movement towards a separate identity puts in question the very idea of a once-for-all covenant with Israel. As the sect grows so unpredictably and powerfully, Judaism has to make an ever greater leap of faith in the finality of God's action, an ever deeper fidelity to a past and a future in God's hands (c.f. Jonathan Sacks, The Chief Rabbi's

Haggadah, p.111). And I suggest that the Christian, instead of being resentful or puzzled at this persistence, needs to understand that the testimony offered in the face of Christianity's own claim can become the most significant and necessary definition of the meaning of the whole idea of covenant. This is a paradoxical matter. But for the Christian to say that God in Jesus has revealed the ultimate and complete guarantee of his promised fidelity is also for the Christian to strike at something central to Jewish identity; and when Jewish identity sustains itself in the face of this, the Christian should be able to recognise with surprise the mirror, the counterpart of what s/he is saying about the unity of the covenantal story. The rupture is real for both, in utterly different ways. But if Jew and Christian can draw this out, they may have something to learn together. The Christian says that in spite of the immense upheaval of the execution and resurrection of the Anointed, God is one and is faithful to his promises. The Jew says that in spite of the immense upheaval of the emergence of Christianity with its counterclaims and its steady ascent to worldly dominance over Jewish communities, God is one and is faithful to his promise. Both struggle to hold on to one past and one future. Both can look at each other's specific and complex history and see how these particular stories bind the recognition of God's natural fidelity to localised narratives fractured as deeply as we could imagine by inner tensions and potential divisions.

My aim in these reflections on the theology of covenant has been to draw out, with Brueggemann, the significance of covenant as the foundation of testimony, testimony to the character of God and to the ultimate unity of God's loving purpose for the human world. Christian and Jew alike resist the notion that these things can be spoken or lived out by general formulae: only the enormous and tragic tensions of actual and local history can say what covenant really means. But only so can covenant truly become a gift to the world's understanding of itself, prompting the world to make the vital connection between the orderly wisdom of nature and the apparently chaotic and terrible particularities of history and community, held together in the invisible, longed-for unity of God's will for human creatures. Covenant promises one world, not a totalising conformity enforced by central power, but a mutual recognition of the debt of honour and love, and a search for ways in which the good of each and the good of all may coincide. And the Christian and the Jew stand face to face, expressing to each other the most serious challenge to such a hope that can be conceived; we could almost say they defy one another to maintain faith in one God and one divine purpose. If that face to face challenge is truly a matter of fraternal love, undertaken as a sort of mutual human covenant - if we as Jews and Christians can be faithful to each other - we ought to be able to leave behind something of the bitter legacy of what Christians see as Jewish rejection and Jews see as Christian oppression and murder. We ought to be able to be amazed at each other and in that amazement to find something of God; and from that will flow a strange but real shared testimony to the world, about God's nature and our own.

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Quelle:
https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2004/12/lecture-at-jewish-christian-relations-centre.aspx (2024-05).