

March 7, 2004

Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The classical and ancient theology of the Christian Church regards as redemptive the entire "event" of Jesus Christ, beginning with His personal and permanent assumption of our flesh. Everything about Jesus Christ is soteriological.

The Incarnation itself, according to the reasoning pursued at the Council of Nicaea, was integral to our redemption. That is to say, we would not be saved unless Jesus Christ were truly both divine and human. This was a point made repeatedly by the most persuasive voice at that council, St. Athanasios of Alexandria.

In accord with this principle, Eastern Christians for a long time have commonly spoken of a triadic structure in the redemption of the human race, a structure corresponding to man's threefold alienation from God.

First, man is alien to God by reason of Creation itself, inasmuch as man has a nature different from God's. This initial alienation, however, has been redeemed by God's taking on our human nature in the Incarnation. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14; cf. Colossians 2:9). Thus, the Incarnation is soteriological.

The Word's sharing of our human nature, moreover, becomes the medium of our participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). As this truth was boldly expressed by Irenaeus of Lyons and many other Church Fathers, but most notably by Athanasios himself, "God became man so that man might become god." This transformation by divine grace is the goal of human existence and man's sole reason for being in this world at all.

Second, man is alien to God by reason of sin, a legacy to which all human beings are heirs, because "by one man's disobedience many were made sinners" (Romans 5:19). To overcome this alienation from God by sin, Jesus died on the cross, thereby reconciling us to our Creator.

Holy Scripture is repetitious and emphatic on this point, insisting that "when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Romans 5:10).

Integral to the reconciling death of Christ were His voluntary sufferings and the sacrificial outpouring of His blood, whereby God washed away the sins of the world. Indeed, the Bible's chief image of the reconciliation on the cross is the blood of Jesus, poured out in libation for the sins of the world. The New Covenant is established by this redemptive shedding of His blood (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24). Only in the blood of Christ do we have access to God.

The necessity that Christ shed His blood for our redemption is established by a general principle governing the biblical sacrifice for sins—namely, "without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22). In Christ, therefore, "we have redemption through His blood, the remission of our sins" (Ephesians 1:7). Jesus "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree . . . , by whose stripes you are healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Thus, the sufferings, bloodshed, and death of Jesus are soteriological.

Third, man is alien to God by reason of death, because death is inseparable from sin. By reason of Adam's offense, "sin entered into the world, and death through sin" (Romans 5:12). Indeed, "sin reigned in death" (5:21). Paul goes to Genesis 3 to explain what he calls "the reign of death" (Romans 5:14,17).

In the Bible death is not natural, nor is it merely biological, and certainly it is not neutral. Apart from Christ, death represents man's final separation from God (Romans 6:21,23; 8:2,6,38). The corruption of death is sin incarnate and rendered visible. When death, this "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:56), has finally been vanquished, then may we most correctly speak of "salvation." (This is why the vocabulary of salvation normally appears in the future tense in the Epistle to the Romans.)

Thus, the resurrection of Jesus is soteriological. Indeed, it is absolutely essential to our redemption, because Christ "was delivered up for our offenses and raised for our

justification" (Romans 4:25). Ultimately it is from the reign of death that He delivers us.

Just as the sufferings and bloodshed of Jesus were integral to the redemptive value of His death, so His passing into glory and His seating at the right hand of God pertain to the fullness of His resurrection. This theme is especially developed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which describes Jesus' ascension as an entry into the heavenly sanctuary as the eternal High Priest, the Mediator of the New Covenant.

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