

March 6, 2005
Meatfare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The narrative tradition of the early Church, preserved especially in her liturgical practice, tended to fix our Lord's sufferings and death in a determined sequence that became standard. This explains why all four Gospels are in substantial harmony regarding that sequence.

It also explains why all the Evangelists begin the Passion story on "the night in which He was betrayed" (1 Corinthians 11:23). In all the Gospels except John, moreover, that betrayal is preceded by an account of the Agony in the Garden.

For all that, the earliest extant version of the Agony in the Garden seems to come, not from the Gospels, but from the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is there that we read of Jesus, "who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He were a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (5:7-8).

In this precious text, the reference to "vehement cries and tears" explains how the early believers knew of this event. There were witnesses to it, some of them only "a little farther" off (Matthew 26:39), "about a stone's throw" (Luke 22:41). Those witnesses could hear those "vehement cries," and they were able to see his kneeling posture (Mark 14:35).

All this happened, says Hebrews, "in the days of His flesh," an expression indicating Jesus' condition of human weakness, willingly assumed so "that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

The object of Jesus' "prayers and supplications," Hebrews tells us, was deliverance from death. This feature of His prayers corresponds to the Gospel accounts in which Jesus prayed that He be spared the "cup" of His coming sufferings (Matthew 26:39,42) and that "the hour might pass from Him" (Mark 14:35).

It was in this hour, says Hebrews, that Jesus "learned obedience by the things which He suffered," a parallel to the Gospel accounts in which the Lord, in His Agony, submits His own will obediently to that of His Father (Matthew 26:39,42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Similarly, the Apostle Paul preserves part of a hymn that speaks of Jesus' obedience unto death, "even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8).

These prayers and supplications of Jesus were themselves sacrificial, because Hebrews says that he "offered" them (*prosenegkas*). They were priestly prayers.

That is to say, Jesus' sacrifice has even now begun. The Lord's Passion is a seamless whole. We perceive already in His prayers and supplications the true essence of sacrifice, which is the inner oblation of oneself to God.

The Book of Hebrews insists, furthermore, that these "prayers and supplications" of Jesus were heard on high, precisely because of "His godly fear," which is to say His godly piety and reverence (*evlabeia*; *reverentia* in the Vulgate). Jesus' obedient reverence is exactly what we find in the Gospel accounts of the Agony.

In what sense, then, was Jesus "heard" when he offered these prayers and supplications? Properly to answer this question, it is useful to remember a principle of all godly petition: "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). Now Jesus prayed explicitly according to God's will; indeed, it was the very essence of His prayer. Therefore, His prayer was heard according to God's will. He was not delivered from death in the sense that He avoided it, but in the sense that He conquered it, that He was victorious over death, that in His own death He trampled down death forever.

This is to say that Jesus' resurrection and glorification were the Father's response to His prayer in the Agony. It was in answer to this prayer, "Thy will be done," that Jesus, "having been perfected, . . . became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (Hebrews 5:9). This was God's will, the very will that Jesus prayed would be done. He was thus "made perfect through sufferings" (2:10). It was because Jesus became obedient unto death that "God also has highly exalted Him" (Philippians 2:9). The Paschal victory over death was the Father's reply to the prayers and supplications offered by the true High Priest in the days of His flesh.

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