

May 1, 2005
Pascha

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although there were plenty of witnesses who could testify to seeing the risen Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:1-8), it is a curious fact that none of them claimed to have seen the Resurrection itself. Indeed, when the Gospel witnesses first learn of the Resurrection, it is already a past event. In every single instance, as far as we can tell from the Sacred Text, everyone who saw the risen Christ had first heard about the Resurrection from somebody else, beginning with the angelic testimony to the Myrrh-Bearers. It is surely significant that, in each case, hearing preceded vision.

This absence of witnesses to the act of the Resurrection is apparently the reason that traditional Eastern iconography is reluctant to portray the event. Instead of the Resurrection imagery common in the West, what we have in the Church of East is the icon of Jesus entering triumphant into hell to preach the Gospel to "the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3:19).

I suppose the obvious question in this respect is this: "If we have no eye-witnesses account of the event of the Resurrection, just where do we find an eyewitness account of Jesus' descent into hell?" In other words, if the absence of such an account renders us reluctant to paint icons of Jesus' Resurrection, what justifies our painting icons of His descent into hell? Do we, after all, have a biblical eyewitness to this latter event?

And the Church's answer to this question has, of course, always been, "Yes, we do have such a witness, and his name is Habakkuk." In truth, the Church has ever regarded the third chapter of Habakkuk as a prophet vision of Jesus' triumphant descent into hell to preach the Gospel to the spirits in prison and to bring forth the ancient saints who so eagerly awaited His arrival.

This reading of Habakkuk is the reason why that prophet's third chapter, for nearly two thousand years in the Church of the West, served as the normal Matins Ode on Friday, the day weekly commemorative of our Lord's death. In the Eastern Church, that same text is chanted among the Matins Odes of Sunday, the day of the Resurrection. The object of Habakkuk's vision, then, is central to the Church's faith, so central that the event itself is included in the Nicene Creed.

Indeed, to make sure that this reliance on Habakkuk is not lost, an image of the prophet himself is commonly included in the icon under discussion. He is normally portrayed on the "Eve side" of the icon, placed near righteous Abel, standing among those who contemplate the Lord raising up the fallen mother of us all. Indeed, in the traditional portrayal of Habakkuk, he stands at the very back of the group, behind the other witnesses, so that we discern nothing of him except his eyes and brow. Thus, Habakkuk appears in this icon solely as a seer, a visionary.

It is no wonder, then, that when the New Testament speaks of the importance of faith, its cited authority on the point is often Habakkuk, whose affirmation "the just shall live by his faith" (2:4) becomes a kind of rallying cry among believers (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

Because Christ's triumphant descent into hell still lay in the future, Habakkuk was obliged to await the fulfillment of the mystery he had beheld in prophetic vision. The Lord instructed him, nonetheless, to inscribe it plainly, in order to prepare His believing people for the coming day: "Write the vision/ And make it plain on tablets,/ That he may run who reads it./ For the vision is yet for an appointed time;/ But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie./ Though it tarries, wait for it; / Because it will surely come,/ It will not tarry" (Habakkuk 2:2-4).

It is important, therefore, not to separate Habakkuk's contemplation of Jesus in the nether world from his affirmation that "the just shall live by his faith." Otherwise this affirmation becomes a merely general notion divorced from its Christological reference. The faith of Habakkuk is faith in the triumphant Christ, that living Gospel striding into the nether world, victorious over sin and death.

The "life" to which Habakkuk refers, the life by which the righteous live, is the paschal life offered by the Christ who tramples down death by death. Habakkuk's role among God's people, then, is that of a visionary who inscribed what in mystic contemplation he beheld, when God came from Teman in order to strike the head from the house of the wicked and to thrust him through with his own arrows.

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