

July 10, 2005
Third Sunday in Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Bible regards as inseparable two things that modern man can hardly imagine are at all related---namely, love for one another and faith in Jesus as the Son of God: "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment."

Why both things together? Indeed, to people nowadays they appear at first to be at odds. After all, love for one another is a value of manifest, unquestioned, and universal appeal. It is a common, comprehensive, unconditional blessing, favorable to humanity everywhere and always. No person of good will can take a rational stand against love for one another. Pursued seriously, in fact, it insinuates a promise of world peace.

In the view of modern man, however, hardly any of this is true of faith in Jesus. Its confessional claims, far from being self-evident, are hard to argue and impossible to verify, a condition that explains why, for no necessary or useful purpose, faith in Jesus tends to divide men from one another. It is dogmatic and narrow, determined by the restrictions of a particular and questionable history (patriarchy, messianism, and all that) that even Jesus failed to escape. Pursued seriously, in fact, faith in Jesus hints at sectarian disputation, strife, and religious wars.

This apparent dilemma poses for Christians, of course, an apologetic task. Some apologists, by way of response to it, contend that the dilemma comes not from Jesus but from His witless, unworthy followers. Jesus, we are told, is not responsible for the sundry sectarian views adopted by the narrow-minded dogmatists that invoke His authority. On the contrary, Jesus was comprehensive and sympathetic. He affirmed people; He even said that He did not come to condemn the world. Indeed, the only individuals Jesus refused to affirm were narrow-minded, unsympathetic bigots, the sort who opposed universal benevolence and world peace. Jesus, for His part, actually commanded love for one another, and if we have not yet attained world peace, maybe the principal reason is that Christians themselves have misunderstood the claims of Jesus.

Let me say that my problem with this line of apologetic reasoning is that it diminishes Jesus, and this in two respects. The first has to do with fact, and the second with presupposition.

First, with respect to fact, I cannot think of any Christian who has been more dogmatic about faith in Jesus than was Jesus Himself. I mean, for instance, what adjective other than narrow should we use to describe the statements, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" and "No one comes to the Father except through Me"?

If comprehensiveness is always to be thought a merit and particularity ever to be judged an offense, what shall we say about the claim: "I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. . . . I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers"?

It seems to me pretty obvious that if Jesus had committed no offense beyond telling people to love one another, He would hardly have suffered so much at the hands of those that knew Him and wanted to get rid of Him. Jesus was not an early version of Gandhi. He was not murdered, I am persuaded, because He taught a doctrine of universal benevolence and world peace. He endured the cross precisely because He crossed people, asserting things about Himself that were particular, rigorously confessional, and unreservedly dogmatic.

Second, with respect to its presupposition, the aforesaid line of apologetic argument implicitly advances the priority of a universal ethical interest---namely, love for one another---over Jesus Himself. This I categorically reject. We Christians do not receive Jesus because He measures up to a mark that we ourselves draw. We must insist that the personal claims of Jesus are not validated because they conform to some already known set of ethical standards universally accepted. We do not hand our lives to Jesus because He meets certain spiritual and moral qualifications that we otherwise recognize apart from Him.

All of this is to say that Jesus did not save the world by teaching men to love one another. He is the Savior of the world because He is God's unique and eternal Son, who assumed our flesh and in that flesh laid down His life as the atoning sacrifice for our sins and then, in that flesh, rose from the dead.

I do not intend, of course, to deny that Jesus is also our Teacher. What I have in mind to reject, rather, is the notion that we are qualified to give our Teacher any "student evaluation," even a favorable evaluation. I am saying that Jesus is not the world's universal teacher in the sense that He teaches truths of a universal, self-evident appeal. The importance of Jesus does not lie in His being the most brilliant member of the faculty.

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