

March 26, 2006

The Third Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When did the early Christians go to the Old Testament, and specifically, to the Book of Isaiah, to interpret and understand the significance of Jesus' sufferings and death?

Although St. Peter's sermon on the first Pentecost affirmed that Jesus had been delivered to His enemies "by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), he did not cite any specific Scriptures to demonstrate this purpose and foreknowledge. This fact seems particularly worthy of note, because Peter did on that occasion cite biblical prophecy with respect to our Lord's resurrection (2:25-36).

Not until Philip do we find our earliest recorded example of recourse to the Old Testament to interpret the theology of Jesus' sufferings and death (8:28-35). Surely this was not Philip's own idea.

Jesus Himself had dropped more than one hint on the subject. He avowed, for example, that He suffered in fulfillment of Holy Scripture (Matthew 26:54), a declaration later prompting His disciples to search the Old Testament under that perspective.

Moreover, Jesus also spoke of the soteriological significance of His death by declaring that His blood was "shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28), thus introducing the Old Testament liturgical category of the "sin offering" to interpret what He accomplished on the cross.

Finally, Jesus described Himself as a servant, who came to give His "life as a ransom for many" (20:28). The Old Testament source for this assertion left no room for doubt. Jesus was clearly identifying Himself as the Servant of the Lord portrayed in the Book of Isaiah, that Servant who "poured out His soul unto death," who "bore the sin of many, / and made intercession for the transgressors." In the suffering Jesus believers would recognize the One that "was led as a lamb to the slaughter," who was "wounded for our transgressions, . . . bruised for our iniquities," who "has borne our griefs / and carried our sorrows."

The early Christians, employing the event of the Cross as the interpretive key of the Holy Scriptures, recognized in these and other lines of Isaiah, the earliest account of the Lord's sufferings and death. They beheld portrayed on the very pages of the Old Testament what they themselves had witnessed on Good Friday. It was as though the prophet had seen the entire drama as vividly as they did. It was as though Isaiah had stood in the courtyard of Caiphas on the night of the Lord's trial, had gone in the morning to the

judgment hall of Pilate, had followed along the way of the Cross, and had taken his place with the holy women on Golgotha to see that "it pleased the Lord to bruise Him."

Furthermore, in the Book of Isaiah these Christians found, not only a graphic depiction of the Lord's sufferings, but also the true theological significance of those sufferings. They not only discovered there an account of Jesus' scourging at the pillar, but also the assertion that "by His stripes we are healed." Not only did the ancient prophet describe the wounds that our Savior endured, but also affirmed that He was "wounded for our transgressions." When the Roman soldiers mocked and beat Jesus, these Christians learned from Isaiah that "the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all." When Jesus died, according to such texts, it was because God made "His soul an offering for sin."

Centuries before any of the four Evangelists told the moving story of Jesus' sufferings and death, then, the Book of Isaiah had already provided, not only an earlier account of that event, but also the first theological treatise on the meaning of that event. Long before the Apostle Paul went forth to preach Christ and Him crucified, the Old Testament prophet had done the same in the mystic light of prophetic vision.

Indeed, one might imagine that the prophetic vision had beheld the Lord's passion even more vividly than did the Evangelists. His description is certainly more vivid and details. Whereas the four Gospels are fairly restrained in their accounts of the Lord's sufferings, not so the Book of Isaiah, where every bruise on the sacred flesh of "the Man of sorrows" is noted, every stripe of His scourging is recorded. The description of Isaiah lingers in loving contemplation on each wound that Jesus endured "for us men and for our salvation." It is a fact that in all of Holy Scripture no writer surpasses Isaiah in the vividness of his descriptions of what our Lord suffered, and why.

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