

April 16, 2006

Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the several images used in Holy Scripture to describe the redemptive work of our Lord there are several in which the language itself is borrowed from the world of commerce. Indeed, the very word "redeem" means "to buy back" or "to pay off." Similarly, sin is spoken of in Holy Scripture as a debt, and Jesus is said to have paid a "price." Since these are mercantile terms, we should probably not wonder that some readers of Holy Scripture have been disposed to think of salvation as some sort of business arrangement, as though Jesus on the Cross handed over a price to a creditor in order to free us from sin and death. Various theories of redemption have been elaborated on such a model.

Theories of this sort fail, however, because they by-pass the traditional metaphorical value with which such terms were already freighted in biblical language.

Take the noun "redemption" and the verb "redeem," for instance. Because the root meaning of "redeem," means "to buy back" and was often applied to the paying of ransom for a slave, "to redeem" rather early came to mean any kind of liberation of a slave. Used in such a sense, there was not necessarily a real price paid to the enslaver.

Redemption often has this extended sense in Holy Scripture, especially when used in a religious context. For example, when God "redeemed" His people out of Egypt, He did not pay Pharaoh some designated sum of money. There was no trade. There was no commercial transaction at all. God simply raided Egypt and took what was His. As we see repeatedly in Isaiah, the Psalms, and elsewhere, this is the normal meaning of "redeem" in the Bible whenever God is the subject. This is also the meaning in the New Testament. When Jesus "redeemed" us from the slavery of sin and power of death, He did not make a payment to the Devil; He raided hell and took what was His.

Similar comments are appropriate when Holy Scripture speaks of the blood of Jesus as the "price" for our sins. The term is a metaphor with not the slightest commercial connotation. Certainly the shedding of Jesus' blood was the price for our sins, but it is quite inappropriate to inquire to whom the price was paid. When used in a metaphorical sense, the word "price" has no a mercantile sense.

We are already familiar with such a meaning of the word. When a soldier dies defending his country, his death is the "price" of his country's victory. When an athlete disciplines himself for coming competition, that exercise is the "price" he pays. We all recognize that the word "price" is used in such cases in figurative way that does indicate a commercial transaction. The price is simply paid; we would not think to ask, "to *whom* was the price paid?" We recognize that the question is inappropriate, and there is never a correct answer to a wrong question.

The blood of Jesus is the greatest price ever paid, but there is no correct answer to the question, "to *whom* was that price paid?" There is no correct answer, for the simple reason that it is not a correct question. Such a question ignores the properly metaphorical sense of the term. This is the reason that such a question is not posed nor addressed in Holy Scripture.

Much the same must be said about the "debt" of our sins, as when the Apostle Paul writes that Christ wiped out our "debt" (*chreigraphon*, perhaps best translated as an "IOU") in Colossians 2:14. Such indebtedness is a metaphor for the sinner's relationship to God, not some actual quantitative liability. Jesus uses the same image in His parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35), where we all recognize it in a metaphorical sense.

To describe these terms as theological metaphors does not weaken their meaning nor dilute their content. The "debt" of our sins is not less crushing for being a figure of speech. The "price" paid in Jesus' blood was not less painful for being expressed in a rhetorical trope, nor was our "redemption" less costly. These words are all metaphors to describe what lies beyond description, beyond comprehension, and beyond all theory. No words suffice to describe what God does, but we may be certain that His work conforms to no human theory on the matter.

There are no "theories of atonement" in Holy Scripture, though there are several ways to describe the atonement. I am not confident that we really need a "theory of atonement," but if we must have one, it should at least respect the correct sense of the words with which the Bible describes the atonement.

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