

April 30, 2006

St. Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The notion of Atonement, in the mind of St. Paul, is impossible to separate from that of freedom, "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). It is the liberty of slaves that have been "redeemed," set free, "bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:22).

In the sociology of the Old Testament the one who purchased the release of a slave or captive, normally a relative or friend, was called the *go'el*, and Holy Scripture often ascribes this title to God in the context of the Exodus (Exodus 6:6-7; Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Psalms 111 [110]:9; Isaiah 43:1), or the return from Babylon (Isaiah 51:11; 52:3-9), or in a more general sense (Psalms 18 [17]:15; 77 [76]:35; Isaiah 41:14; 43:14; 44:6; 47:4).

When applied to God, of course, this term for "redeemer" or "liberator" does not imply the actual paying of a ransom, for God owes no one anything (Isaiah 52:3).

Although the Christian Tradition, from very early times, has been accustomed to referring to the Lord Jesus as our Redeemer (*lytotes*--Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 30.3; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catachesis* 2.12; Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Addresses* 15; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 10.2), it is a curious fact that this word is never used in the New Testament in reference to Jesus. He is called, rather, our "Redemption"- "you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God-and righteousness and sanctification and redemption [*apolytroisis*]" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Paul speaks likewise of "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus"(Romans 3:24).

From what, then, are we set free by "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus"? We are liberated, says the Apostle Paul, from our sins (Romans 6:6-11; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; Titus 2:14), from the ineffectiveness of the Mosaic Law (Romans 7:3-6; Galatians 2:4; 4:22-31; 5:1), from our own weakness (Romans 7:13-23), and, most of all, from death (Romans 8:2). In a more general sense the whole existence of believers is permeated with the sense and experience of liberation (1 Corinthians 9:1,19; 10:29; 2 Corinthians 3:17).

Few truths of Holy Scripture, however, have been so misunderstood as Christian freedom. Even in New Testament times there were occasionally those who took it to mean liberation from all restraint and principle, and this heresy has shown its head from time to time throughout Christian history. In modern times some Christians have confused it with political history, mixing Christian freedom with Marxist liberation theories. Great spiritual harm has come from such confusions.

If we think of Christian liberation in its biblical background and framework, we are not surprised that in some sense the one who redeems the slave owns the slave. Hence, Holy Scripture speaks of God's deliverance in terms of acquisition and possession, even of adoption (Exodus 15:16; 19:5; Isaiah 43:21; Psalms 74 [73]:2; 135 [134]:4; Revelation 5:9-10). It is for this reason that the Apostle Paul, when he writes of our redemption in Christ (Galatians 3:13; 4:5), this concept is inseparable from the thesis that those redeemed in Christ belong to Christ (Romans 6:16-22; 14:7-9). Theirs is a "redemption of acquisition" (Ephesians 1:14), whereby "He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:15). Christian liberty is never freedom from Christ!

Finally, this freedom in Christ, because it is being worked out in history, is as yet incomplete. It is not only a fact of human experience; it is also a promise of cosmic hope. Indeed, the Apostle Paul describes the cosmos itself as awaiting its final manifestation: "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now." And for what is all of creation waiting so eagerly? Nothing less than its own participation in man's liberation from death: "the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-22).

In the Epistle to the Romans, the vocabulary of salvation most often refers to the future, when all of creation will be transfigured by the resurrection of the glorified bodies of those who belong to Christ. Universal liberation from death is the final victory.

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