

June 11, 2006

Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

During the forty days following His Resurrection, Jesus acts very differently than He did before. During this period when, says St. Luke, "He presented Himself alive . . . by many infallible proofs," Jesus seems to be only half with us. He appears in one place, then appears somewhere else, but He does not seem to travel from the one location to the next. He comes on a scene without warning, passing mysteriously through doors, and then making it a point to demonstrate the solidity of His flesh and bones. Then, just as abruptly, He takes His leave, we know not how. Jesus' behavior--if the word be allowed--during this time is strange, unpredictable, and certainly inconsistent with normal expectations.

Just as He passes through the closed door of the upper room, our Lord seems also, without actually rending it, to make repeated openings into time. The various post-Resurrection stories, which are notoriously difficult to reconcile as parts of sequential history, indicate that Jesus' new existence does not display what we normally think of as sequence. It is as though His life is set free from the limitations of time and space. Indeed, we believe this to be the truth.

The unpredictable absence and presence of the risen Jesus during this time convey the impression that He is living partly in eternity, partly in time, half in heaven, and half among mortals. It is as though He is hesitant to take His physical leave of history, and we believe this too to be the truth.

In fact He prolongs His stay on this earth so that the Church may be further strengthened. For forty days He fortifies in His believers the sense that He is gone but is still with them. In sundry ways He acquaints them with a new mode of His presence.

During this time He appears repeatedly to speak of things pertaining to the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). Certainly His earlier days on earth Jesus discoursed on this very subject times out of mind, but now the teaching of the kingdom is contoured and nuanced by the new condition of the Teacher. In some sense the kingdom itself is different

now; at least it is experienced differently, as the risen Lord delicately accustoms His Church to a new way of His being with them.

Sweet indeed are these forty days, and unique beyond any period in the history of world. Jesus of Nazareth has died, has descended into hell and triumphed over death by coming forth from the tomb, but He has not yet taken leave of history. He prolongs His sojourn among those that love Him. These days are not only tender and loving, and also exciting.

Indeed, there is something about this time that one dares to describe as jocose. Is there not something exceeding playful, for instance, in our Lord's incognito appearance to Mary Magdalene, just before revealing Himself in a single word? Again, still playing the stranger, He walks some seven miles with two disciples, using the grammatical third person to question them about His own death, lecturing them at length on the Holy Scriptures, and then finally disappearing at the moment they recognize Him in the breaking of the bread.

If we look for a term to describe such conduct, the words "hide and seek" may come to mind, and this is the name of a game. Is He not in some sense playing with us? There is a delicate touch of frolic in all this, a quiet celebration among these friends of the Victor over sin and death.

Thus, there is an element of mirth and teasing in the Lord's invitation to skeptical Thomas to inspect the wounds of the Passion, and irony is perhaps the word that best describes the way our Lord presses Simon Peter three times at the lakeside: "Do you love Me?"

Just what is our Lord about during this time? He is putting the final touches on His Church. And I use the word "touches" on purpose. Touching us here is what He does. He employs this brief period to impress an immediate and final shape on the memory and imagination of His people. Yes, touch is the word we want.

Indeed, when the Gospel was preached not long afterwards, the preaching was shaped by the events of these forty days (Acts 2: 32). When, decades later, the Gospels were written, they were composed in the warm light shed quietly upon the Church during this time. The Church would never be able to look back at the life of Jesus except through the post-Resurrection lens. Indeed, the very attempt would be

irreverent, like analyzing the physics of a kiss. (This is the reason why, by the way, there is a radical frustration built into later attempts to find "the historical Jesus." The Church rightly reacts against such efforts. These forty days were an essential component, even a defining part, of that history!)

The Lord's final act is to raise His hands in blessing, as He ascends into heaven, after which we faithful return to the upper room for a prayerful retreat to assimilate in our hearts the mystery so recently, so gently too, and so deftly revealed.

How long will it last? We have no idea. "When" is none of the Church's business. It is not for us to know the times or seasons that the Father has put in His own authority (Acts 1:7). Concerns about God's schedule are a great distraction and open to terrible deceptions.

And this is perhaps the most important lesson that we learn during these forty days of His mysterious lingering with us. He will do what He will do, and He will pick the time and place of doing it. Until the end of the world our task, according to the earliest page of the New Testament, is simply "to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

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