

August 6, 2006

The Transfiguration of our Lord

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of the features of Israel's most ancient Wisdom literature is its "exhortation to the child," a rhetorical form recognized by its use of the direct address "my son" (*beni*--Proverbs 1:8,10,15; 2:1; 3:1,11,21; 4:1,11-and so on).

This exhortation indicates that the transmission of Wisdom is by age. Wisdom in the Bible is "inherited." That is to say, the young, inexperienced person is to benefit from the accumulated insight and perspective of the generations to which he is heir. The earlier generations have already learned, from experience and study, what the neophyte needs to know, and the transmission of this Wisdom pertains to his inheritance.

And what, according to that early tradition, did bygone generations learn that will be of service to those who come afterwards? Well, they learned very practical sorts of things having to do with moral uprightness, vigilance, and the steady application of effort. In these exhortations the young person is repeatedly promised that he can expect blessings and other good things if only he keeps the traditional rules, applies himself industriously, and avoids occasions of sin. The tone is entirely upbeat and positive.

When, however, many centuries later, we come to the last of the Bible's "exhortations to the child," we immediately recognize a very different tone, not so upbeat, not so optimistic in its promises. This last exhortation is found near the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, written during the second century before Christ. It is worth reviewing in detail:

"Child, when you come to the service of God, stand in justice and in fear, and prepare your soul for temptation. Humble your heart, and endure, . . . and make not haste in the time of attack Take all that shall be brought upon you, and in your sorrow endure, and in your humiliation keep patience. For gold is tried in the fire, but acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation" (Sirach 2: 1-5).

Ecclesiasticus introduces here two ideas not so obvious in earlier examples of the exhortation to the child. First, Wisdom consists in the service of God (*doulevein Kyrio*). Second, the attainment of Wisdom is impossible without patience in tribulation. Neither of these themes, which are certainly inseparable, was very pronounced in the earlier Wisdom perspective represented in the Book of Proverbs.

I would like to suggest that, in bringing these two themes (the service of God and patience in trial) into Israel's "mainline" Wisdom transmission, Sirach is the heir of the Book of Job, that later and thornier reflection on Wisdom.

The Book of Job, we may recall, mounted what was virtually a challenge to the themes of the Book of Proverbs. Whereas Proverbs promised divine blessings on the blameless and upright man, who feared God and shunned evil, the Book of Job told a very different story. At the beginning of the Book of Job, this just man is the very embodiment of the moral ideal held up in the Book of Proverbs. Yet the entire book goes on to describe the terrible trials and torments to which Job was subject in soul, body, and condition.

In Sirach's exhortation we find these ideas from Job now incorporated into the traditional exhortation given to the young person. Like Job (Job 1:8; 2:3; 42:8), he is called to "serve" God, in a service where he can expect to be tried and humiliated, almost beyond measure. This idea Sirach learned from Job--that the true servant of God is a suffering servant.

The young person, therefore, must receive an augmented instruction. He must learn, not only of the blessings promised to those that endeavor to please God, but also of the trials that will accompany that effort. He must be informed, at the very beginning, what to expect in this regard. This, too, is part of his inheritance, learned by the sufferings that God's people had endured in recent centuries: the Babylonian Captivity, the Persian dominance, the persecutions endured under Greek rule.

It is the merit of Sirach that he introduces this theme of patient endurance into the traditional exhortation that had always been part of Israel's Wisdom literature. He sees that the child, the expected beneficiary of this inheritance, should know the whole story. It is not enough to tell him that all will go well if only he keeps the rules and

brings godly governance into his life. He must also know that the Lord permits His servants to be tried by fire.

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