

September 3, 2006

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In a verse difficult to translate without distortion, the son of Sirach tells the student of Wisdom (according to the KJV) to "keep watch for opportunity" (Ecclesiasticus 4:20). What? The Word of God teaching opportunism? Does that sound likely?

Not less disconcerting, perhaps, is St. Jerome's Latin translation that renders it *conserva tempus*. A very literal translation of that rendering comes out as "save time." Somehow this doesn't sound right either. I suppose that "saving time" is far better than "killing time," but I am not sure that is what Sirach had in mind to say.

The Douay-Rheims, which is based on St. Jerome's Latin, had the good sense to *conserva tempus* into English as "observe the time." Certainly this is a move closer to the truth, but the meaning is still not obvious.

The RSV is also plausible, with "Observe the right time." Nonetheless I don't think this quite catches the exact meaning either.

Let's look at the canonical Greek text more carefully. The first clause of Ecclesiasticus 4:20 is a rich expression: *syntereson kairon*. With just two words to work with, we may start with the verb, *syntereo*. Among the possible meanings of this verb, perhaps the closest to the present context is the one we find in Polybius (4.60.10), where it denotes "observe" or "adhere to" (certain laws). In this context it bears the double connotation of vigilance and responsibility. This is certainly what Sirach has in mind as well.

No less important to Sirach's meaning, of course, is his noun, *kairon*, appropriately translated as "time." It means time, however, in a special sense that we will consider below.

Before we do so, let me note in passing that the root of this word, *kairo--*, also appears in that same passage of Polybius in a modifying participle, *evkairountes*. This word literally means "making happy the moment." I suggest that "benefiting from the moment" gains the proper sense of the passage. What should be noted in this passage of Polybius is this word's conjunction with "observing" or "adhering to." This sense, I hope to show, is precisely what we find in Sirach.

Returning then to our analysis of Sirach, we must remark that the Greek language has two different words for time. The first is *chronos* from which we have "chronic" and "chronology." This noun designates time in sequence, or "the flow of time." The second word is *kairos*, meaning an instance of time, an occasion, time as the moment, the "now." This latter is the noun we have in our text from Sirach.

Thus, the young man instructed by Sirach is exhorted to keep custody over this latter kind of time, the *kairos*, the moment in which he is living and of which he is conscious. This is the only sort of time over which the human being has some measure of control, the moment that allows and offers the opportunity for a choice or decision. This is a "time" in which a principle can be adhered to, a thesis affirmed, or a direction changed. This is time as morally significant, time as decisive. In this sense, "saving time" takes on even a note of soteriology.

The moral guardianship of the moment is an important element in the religious psychology of Sirach, who uses the word *kairos* 61 times. It involves a special active consciousness and moral self-awareness.

Such custody of the "now" may be contrasted with a dulled consciousness that is dominated by *chronos*, time as fluid, or what in literary criticism is called "the stream of consciousness." The non-reflecting mind, immersed in the shifting tides of time, "goes with the flow." A man with this sort of mind rushes on in the current, insouciant to the determination of his destiny. He remains in the grip of blind events. Sadly, there are men that seem to spend most or all of their lives in a psychological acquiescence of this sort.

Against such a moral passivity, then, Sirach cautions the student of Wisdom to "safeguard the occasion," to observe the *kairos*, to exercise stewardship over the moment, to impose a moral form on the "now."

The Christian will recognize that the "now" is also the moment of divine grace, and his conscious moral custody of the occasion will prompt him to submit his whole being, during every moment of reflection, to the presence of the God who knows and reads his heart. In this way, the "now" becomes the moment of salvation. I do not say that God has no other avenue through which to act on our souls. This is the path, however, where we are most conscious of it.

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