

October 22, 2006

## **Abercius of Hierapolis**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Strictly speaking, human history has had only one 'saint.' At least that is what I infer from the Church's statement on the subject. When we chant the Great Doxology at the end of Matins, we declare to Christ our Lord, "Thou alone are holy" (*Sy ei monos Hagios*). I think that text rather settles the point.

But it is also a starting point, because more needs to be said on the subject. When we speak of Christ, among all human beings, as "alone holy," the expression is not one of simple degree. It is not a quantitative assertion, declaring that Christ, being holier than the rest of us, is said to be the "only saint" (*Tu solus Sanctus*). He is not only holier than the rest of us. He is holy in a sense very different from the rest of us. His is not a derived holiness. It is the very holiness of God, "for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

The first person in history to perceive this, I suppose, was the prophet Isaiah, who in mystic vision in the Temple, "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up." Isaiah, being a man of unclean lips and coming from the midst of a people with unclean lips, might not have perceived the holiness of this enthroned Lord, but the voices of the Seraphim left him little room for doubt. "Holy, holy, holy," they cried, "the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!"

There is a sense in which this scene in Isaiah 6 is our first treatise in Christology. Indeed, the New Testament writers perceived in this call of Isaiah a prophetic adumbration of the mystery that they themselves were called to proclaim.

The explanation of their insight requires what may seem at first a digression, but we must make it anyway.

An important component of the work of the New Testament writers was to address the singular, dark mystery of the Messiah's rejection by the Chosen People, and they had recourse to Isaiah 6 in order to throw light on this matter. Had not Isaiah been ordered to preach with such clarity that only hardness of heart would explain the rejection of his message (Isaiah 6:9-10)? The Lord told him, "'Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed."

This same hardness of heart met by the preaching of Isaiah, the New Testament writers saw, was the key to the Jews' refusal to recognize their Messiah, the same Messiah foretold in unmistakable terms by that ancient prophet. Because Jesus was rejected for the same reason that the preaching of Isaiah was rejected, the New Testament writers quoted these very words of Isaiah's prophecy in order to explain the

matter ((Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; Acts 28:26-27). That is to say, the people who rejected the prophecies of Isaiah could hardly do other than reject the One whom Isaiah prophesied.

The Evangelist John, who also cites these words from the Book of Isaiah to make the same point (John 12:39-40), goes on to elaborate on the original context of those words: "These things Isaiah said when *he saw His glory and spoke of Him*" (12:41). In this very important text, John recognizes Jesus as the "Lord" that Isaiah had seen, "high and lifted up." Jesus was that "Lord," of whom the Seraphim cried, "Holy, holy, holy." And to this day, this Isaian text prompts us to pray to Christ our Lord, "Thou alone art holy." Indeed, during the Divine Liturgy, we take up again the cry of the Seraphim to chant to the Lord Christ, "Holy, Holy, Holy." It is no wonder that Isaiah is sometimes called "the fifth Evangelist."

Let us return, then, to the holiness of Christ. If Christ alone is holy, it is also His glory that fills the earth. "The whole earth is full of His glory," chanted the Seraphim. Holiness is God's glory hidden and unseen. Glory is God's holiness openly revealed. Hence, it is the holiness of Christ that causes the glory of God to shine forth from His face (John 1:14; 2 Corinthians 4:4,6; 2 Peter 1:17-19). It is His face that conceals and reveals the mystery.

When Isaiah describes this "Lord" as "high and lifted up" (*ram wenissa'*--6:1; 57:15), he employs the same expression that later portrays the Suffering Servant (52:13). The Lord and the Suffering Servant are, in fact, the same Person, the One who alone is holy. Our Lord, both God and man, is the only "saint." All holiness comes into humanity through Him, not only by way of channel but also by way of font.

The holiness ascribed to human beings, therefore, is derived from their union with Jesus Christ, for there is no holiness apart from Him. This is the reason why, notwithstanding the great diversity among the saints, there is an essential oneness among them. They are all branches joined to the one Vine.

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