

November 5, 2006

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

If asked to identify a single point of emphasis in the Book of Isaiah, a special feature that distinguishes this prophet from the other prophets of the Bible, I suspect the word "holiness" might come to mind. Isaiah is particularly the prophet of the divine holiness.

To begin with, Isaiah's prophetic call came in an overwhelming experience of the holiness of God. He remembered vividly the very year it happened. It was 742 B.C., "the year that King Uzziah died." The prophet saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his train filled the Temple. He listened to the alternating chant of the fiery Seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring aloft, borne on their pinions, singing the triumphal hymn, shouting, proclaiming, and saying: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, the earth is full of His glory."

It is perhaps needless to say, Isaiah was never again the same. Throughout the rest of the book that bears this prophet's name, God is repeatedly called "the Holy One of Israel." This expression is found 26 times throughout the Book of Isaiah, in each of its three major parts, whereas the expression appears only six other times in the entire remainder of the Hebrew Bible. God as "the Holy One of Israel" is arguably the most unifying motif in the Book of Isaiah.

In addition to this specific title, Isaiah uses the adjective "holy" (*qadosh*) in ascription to God more times (33) than all the other books of the Old Testament put together (26). Once again, this ascription of holiness to God is found rather uniformly throughout all of Isaiah.

Its contextual applications, however, are not uniform. To wit:

In the first section of Isaiah, the prophecies of the Messiah (chapters 1-39), the appeal to God's holiness is especially found in the setting of the divine judgment on those that reject that holiness. Thus, we read, "They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel" (1:4; cf. 5:16,24; 30:11; 31:1; 37:23). In this context of judgment the holiness of God is perceived as menacing to the idolatrous and unrepentant nation; even the unclean prophet felt threatened (6:5).

In the second part of Isaiah, the prophecies of the Servant of the Lord (chapters 40-55), the references to the divine holiness consistently appear in the context of redemption. Typical in this respect is Isaiah 41:14: "'Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I will help you,' says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."

In this setting God's holiness does not inspire fear but reassurance. Thus we read, "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (43:3-4; cf.

52:10). Again, God calls Himself "your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel" (43:14; cf. 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5).

This theme of deliverance also marks the references to the divine holiness in the third section of Isaiah, the prophecies of the Triumphant Warrior (chapters 56-66). Thus, we read of the cargo ships that will come from the west, "to bring your sons from afar, their silver and their gold with them, to the Name of the Lord your God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because He has glorified you" (60:8). Whereas in the first part of Isaiah the unrepentant nation is threatened by the holiness of God, in this last section that same nation receives the promise, "they shall call you the city of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (60:14).

Taking the Book of Isaiah as a whole (appropriately, because the book has been handed down to us a whole), we discern that the divine holiness embraces more than one experience. It includes, not only the sense of transcendence and the sentiment of terror, but also the renewal of strength and the resurgence of hope.

Finally, all three parts of the Book of Isaiah are concerned with the same figure of holiness, because the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, and the Triumphant Hero are all the same Person. He is the Messiah in His conception and birth--the mystery of the Incarnation, about which Isaiah says a great deal (7:14; 9:1-2,6-7; 11:1-5). He is the Servant of the Lord in His sufferings and death--the mystery of the Cross, which Isaiah describes in unforgettable detail (50:4-9; 52:13-15; 53:1-12). He is the Triumphant Warrior in His Victory over sin and death--the mystery of His Resurrection and Exaltation, the theme on which Isaiah ends (56:6-8; 59:15-20; 60:1-22; 61:1-3; 62:1-5; 63:1-6).

More clearly than any of the other prophets, Isaiah perceived the revelation of the divine holiness in all of these mysteries of Christ our Lord, "when he saw His glory and spoke of Him" (John 12:41).

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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