

December 17, 2006

Fifth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Rather early the Christian mind began to ask, "Why did God become man?" The Council of Nicaea declared simply that the Incarnation took place "for us men and for our salvation." That is to say, it is a dogma of the Church that the intent of the Incarnation was soteriological.

For the rest, however, the history of theology has witnessed a certain diversity in the ways this soteriological intent of the Incarnation was expressed. More specifically, the answer to the question "Why God became man?" depended in no small measure on the meaning of salvation, and Christians, even from New Testament times, have variously described salvation.

For example, the soteriological intent of the Incarnation was expressed very early in the Epistle to the Hebrews. According to this source, the Incarnation provided God's Son with the means of suffering and dying in obedience to His Father. Commenting on Psalm 39 (40), the author wrote with respect to the Incarnation, "Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: / 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, / But a body You have prepared for Me. / In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin / You had no pleasure. / Then I said, \Behold, I have come / -In the volume of the book it is written of Me- / To do Your will, O God'"(10:5-7). That is to say, the obedience of Christ was to fulfill and replace the various sacrifices of the Mosaic Law, and for this task the Son obviously required a body.

Moreover, the Son needed this body in order to suffer and die for the human race. Thus, commenting on Psalm 8, this author described in what way the Son became man for our salvation. "We see Jesus," he wrote, "who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" (2:9).

In order to "taste death" in obedience to the Father, then, the Son assumed our flesh. In order to die as an act of sacrifice, he had to share the mortality of our flesh. Hebrews goes on to say, "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

In sum, two aspects of the soteriology of the Incarnation are especially to be observed in treatment of the theme in Hebrews. First, God's Son assumed our flesh in order obediently to die in that flesh. Second, His death in the flesh meant the destruction of the devil, "who had the power of death." According to Hebrews, then,

God's Son took flesh in order to die, and He died in order to overcome death and the devil. This line of theological reflection--Incarnation, death, victory--continued throughout Christian history, combining with other biblical themes along the way.

In the following century, for instance, Irenaeus, the second bishop of Lyons, followed the same theological line as the author of Hebrews, but he adorned it by introducing the Pauline contrast between Christ and Adam. According to Irenaeus the Word's assumption of the flesh was required for our salvation because Adam's sin had been committed in the flesh. Sin in the flesh required salvation in the flesh. He explained, "So the Word was made flesh in order that sin, destroyed by means of that same flesh through which it had gained mastery and taken hold and lorded it, should no longer be in us," and "that so He might join battle on behalf of our forefathers and vanquish through Adam what had stricken us through Adam" (*Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 31).

As I noted, Irenaeus here is clearly the heir to St. Paul, who contrasted Christ and Adam in terms of "disobedience unto death" and "obedience unto life" (Romans 5:12-19)

In his treatment of salvation, however, Irenaeus stresses the resurrection much more explicitly than is obvious in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and this in turn colors his approach to the Incarnation. Thus, he writes of "our Lord's birth, which the Word of God underwent for our sake, to be made flesh, that He might reveal the resurrection of the flesh and take the lead of all in heaven." In this way, explains Irenaeus, Christ becomes "the first-born of the dead, the head and source of the life unto God" (*op.cit.*, 39).

In his development of this idea, Irenaeus is still following the lead of St. Paul, who contrasted Christ and Adam with respect to death and resurrection: (1 Corinthians 15:22,45).

In tying the soteriological intent of the Incarnation to the Lord's resurrection from the dead, Irenaeus advances an important doctrinal perspective. We may contrast this perspective with the soteriology of some later Christians, who concentrated entirely on the Lord's atoning death as the means of our redemption, with scarcely any attention to the soteriological significance of the resurrection.

Thus, Irenaeus, not neglecting the biblical theme of "obedience in the flesh," sets himself to provide a more ample answer to the question "Why Incarnation?" His larger answer to this question, an answer that includes the Lord's resurrection, colors his soteriology with a dominant concern for the total transformation of humanity, and all of creation, in Christ. This became a major theme in Irenaeus.

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