

December 31, 2006

The Sunday After Christmas

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Addressing the question, "Why did God become man?" Athanasius of Alexandria largely follows the lines of response already elaborated in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in Irenaeus of Lyons--namely, the Incarnation was required for man's reconciliation with God.

Man's repentance from sin, Athanasius contended, would not have been adequate to restore him to friendship with God. To imagine otherwise is to suppose an inadequate and unbiblical view of sin. Sin is not a merely moral offense, after all, an injury readily cured by simple repentance. Still less is it just a forensic declaration of guilt that could be reversed by a contrary declaration of reprieve. Nor is sin just a spiritual state that could be altered by some kind of spiritual adjustment. And certainly sin is not the sort of affront that can be remedied by a sincere apology.

According to Holy Scripture sin is bondage to death and corruption. Death and corruption are not punishments imposed on sin from without. They are internal to sin itself, the very "embodiment" of sin. Thus the Apostle Paul declared that "sin reigned in death" (*ebasilevsen he hamartia en to thanato*--Romans 5:21). To deal with sin, it was necessary to deal with death and corruption.

For this reason, Athanasius argued, the power of sin, which is the corruption of death, had to be defeated *in the flesh*. This necessity of the Word's enfleshment pertained to what Athanasius called "the divine reasonableness" (*to evlogon to pros ton Theon*--*On the Incarnation* 7).

Whereas many later theologians, especially in the West, thought of Redemption in terms of the divine justice, Athanasius thought of it in terms of the divine "reasonableness" or *evlogon*, that sustained propriety, coherence, consistency and proportion that distinguishes all of God's dealings with men.

The death of Christ in the flesh, in the eyes of Athanasius, was directed, then, not at God's offended justice, but at man's bondage to corruption. Since man had fallen in the flesh, reasoned Athanasius, it was reasonable, symmetric, appropriate, proportionate—in short, *evlogon*--that man be restored in the flesh. "For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world" (*ibid.* 8).

Thus, Athanasius explained, it pertained to the Word, "and to Him alone, to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to guard for the Father His reasonableness in all things (*to hyper panton evlogon*). Being the Word of the Father and above all, He alone was consequently able and qualified to recreate (*anaktisai*) all, to suffer for all (*hyper panton pathein*), and to represent all to the Father" (*ibid.* 7).

Following the line of argument that we find in Hebrews 2, Athanasius reasoned thus: "The Word understood that corruption could not be destroyed except through death.

Yet, as God's Word and Son, He was immortal and could in no wise die. For this reason He took on a body capable of dying."

By sharing the flesh of mortal human beings, Athanasius went on, God's Word offered Himself on their behalf: "By surrendering to death the body that He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from all defilement--by this proportionate offering--He obliterated death for all those who shared it with Him" (*ibid.* 9).

In order overcome this corruption of sin, however, it was required, not only that God's Word should die in the flesh, but also that He should rise again in the flesh. Only in the Resurrection was corruption abolished. Indeed, God's Word assumed the body *in order to be* raised in the body: "It was the Lord's chief concern to bring about (*poiein*) the resurrection of the body. With respect to death this was the trophy for public display, to be everyone's guarantee that He had overcome corruption, and that their own bodies would in due course be incorrupt. It was in pledge thereto and as a declaration of everyone's future resurrection that He preserved His own body incorrupt" (*ibid.* 22).

For this reason, wrote Athanasius, Christ died in order to rise: "death had to precede resurrection, for there could be no resurrection without it" (*ibid.* 23). "He descended in a body, and He rose again, because He was God in a body. . . . Death pertains to man. Therefore the Word, as God, became flesh in order that, being put to death in the flesh, He might give life to all men by the power that is proper to Him" (*Against the Arians* 1.44).

In Athanasius, then, whose Christology became the standard of orthodoxy in the fourth century, the Incarnation pertains essentially to the mystery of man's redemption. He insisted that the Word's assumption of our flesh was the condition of His death and Resurrection, because he perceived the "fleshly" nature of that redemption. For Athanasius the doctrine of the redemption meant that something changed in man, not in God.

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