

January 7, 2007

## **The Sunday After Theophany**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Arguably among the earliest themes of Christian theology was a contrast between Christ and Adam. The letters of Paul are an obvious source of this contrast, chiefly in two places, the earlier being 1 Corinthians 15, and the second, Romans 5. These two texts differ, however, in emphasis and application.

Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15, which may be called cosmological, has to do with the quality of created matter, the "dust" of Genesis 2-3. Paul's case here is largely centered on Adam's legacy of death and corruption, to which the Apostle contrasts the immortality of the body through the Resurrection of Christ. Adam was formed of dust, to which he returned. Because of Christ's Resurrection from the dead, nonetheless, this inheritance of corruption from Adam is not the final word about the human prospect, says Paul. Although humanity certainly shares in Adam's corruption, in Christ it is made to share in the incorruption of the Resurrection: "The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption (15:42). Thus, "as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man" (15:49).

In the later text, Romans 5, Paul returns to the contrast between Adam and Christ, but now with a different emphasis and application. He here develops the theme from an historical rather than a cosmological perspective. Whereas in Adam, Paul argues, "sin entered the world, and death through sin," through the obedience of Christ "many will be made righteous" (5:12,19). In short, "if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many" (5:15).

Each of these two contrasts between Adam and Christ serves the general concern of the specific epistle in which it appears. In 1 Corinthians, it is the Paschal Mystery ("Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us," says 1 Corinthians 5:7), and in Romans it is Justification. The second, which treats of the obedience of Christ, reflects the theology of Holy Thursday and Good Friday. The first, which is based on the Resurrection, pertains to the theology of Easter Sunday.

The contrast between Christ and Adam, however, does not appear to have been original with Paul. It seems to me (as it does to others) that we already find that contrast in what is apparently an ancient hymn verse cited by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,

being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:5-11 RSV).

Two points may be made about this passage, I believe.

First, its rich doctrinal character is surprising in a context where we would not expect it. The context is not doctrinal. It is, rather, a moral exhortation, in which Paul describes how Christians are to be humble and obedient in their regard and behavior toward one another (2:1-4,12-16). Settled in the middle of that context, the Christological passage quoted above has the feel of an insertion. It takes the reader in a specifically doctrinal direction. It appears that Paul, wanting to hold up the example of the obedience of Christ, reminds them of a text that he expects his readers to recognize. Familiar texts like this are frequently taken from well known hymns, and a close reading of the passage suggests a strophic structure.

Second, at least part of the content of this hymnic insertion clearly relies on a contrast between Christ and Adam. Adam, we recall, was disobedient in trying to become like God. This is implied in what the serpent told Eve with respect to the forbidden fruit: "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). That is to say, disobedient Adam "regarded equality with God a thing to be grasped" (*harpagmon egesato to einai isa Theo*).

God's Son, in contrast, being "in the form of God" (*en morphe Theou*), was already "equal to God" (*isa Theo*). He had not need to grasp it. Yet He emptied Himself and assumed "the form of a servant" (*morphen doulou*), becoming obedient to death on the Cross. This is the model of obedience that Paul holds out to Christians, telling them, "Have this mind (*touto phroneite*) among yourselves." Believers are to abandon the example of Adam and pursue the standard of Christ.

In sum, Paul himself apparently inherited this contrast between Adam and Christ from the hymnography of early Christian worship. For this reason it should be regarded as coming from the most primitive theological insights of Christians. In 1 Corinthians and Romans Paul himself represents new developments on the theme, applied to the two disputed questions he had in mind to address, the Resurrection and Justification.

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