

January 28, 2007

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In one of those perceptive historical surveys that make his book so attractive, the son of Sirach meditates on the works of Creation, culminating in the human being, and continues with the gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai (Ecclesiasticus 16:18-17:18).

Passing rather quickly through the first five days of Creation (16:25-30), Sirach looks more closely at the sixth day and the special gifts by which the Lord graced the existence of man (17:1-10). He recalls that the human being was made in God's image, which is expressed in his governance over other creatures. This dominion, in turn, is based on man's unique ability to think rationally, to reflect critically on his own act of thought, and to give creative narrative shape to the contents of his memory and imagination: "He placed the fear of them in all living beings, and granted them dominion over beasts and birds. He made for them tongue and eyes; he gave them ears and a mind for thinking" (17:4-6 RSV).

This construction of man's being was, in fact, God's first revelation to man's reflective mind, whereby he was endowed with an innate moral sense: "He filled them with knowledge and understanding, and showed them good and evil. . . . He bestowed knowledge upon them, and allotted to them the law of life" (17:6,7,11 RSV).

This revelation included also a rational impulse to regard Creation as the disclosure of divine truth and glory: "He set his eye upon their hearts to show them the majesty of his works. And they will praise his holy name, to proclaim the grandeur of his works" (17:8-10 RSV).

To say that God set His eye on the human heart is to proclaim the deepest truth of man as a moral being. So, when a man truly discovers his heart, he uncovers it as something already known and accounted for by Someone Else. This is so true, indeed, that a man does not truly *find* his heart except as the object of the divine scrutiny. That is to say, man knows God through the personal discovery that God knows him. I suggest, moreover, that this sense of standing under the divine gaze is the precondition of faith, which is the primal, necessary channel of man's communion with God.

Thus, before going on to speak of God's historical revelation on Mount Sinai, Sirach feels obliged to reflect on an essential condition that makes human history possible. Man's history, after all, is not just another dimension of "natural history," because the human being represents a radical discontinuity from all other creatures. This discontinuity is found in God's endowment of the human soul with the specific capacity for history. Other things exist through the passage of time, but they don't really have a history. Strictly speaking, it is only the human being

that can have a history, because only the human being is qualified to reflect critically on the events that take place in time and to arrange those events in narrative form.

Thus, and more specifically, Sirach cannot speak of God's Self-revelation in history, until he establishes that principle, innate in man, by which God's historical revelation can be recognized. That is to say, what God does in history cannot be known as Revelation unless God first confers on the human heart an impulse toward narrative, a capacity to recall--to call back--in story form, an innate disposition to review the human experience in a structured account. In other words, there can be such a thing as human history because God first placed in the human soul the impulse towards historiography. Man can have a history, only because God created him as a storyteller.

This native impulse toward historiography, however, which is distinctively human, is a moral instinct. Storytelling is essentially an artistic effort to confer shape on the soul.

And this, in turn, is essential to historical Revelation. If history cannot carry meaning at all, then history certainly cannot bear the immense burden of Revelation.

Such is the continuity that Sirach perceives between the creation of man in Genesis and the gift of the Torah in Exodus. There is a narrative continuity between the two because they form a metaphysical and moral continuity, a single divine revelation, in both nature and in history.

In short, there would be no point in the Bible's recording every word that proceeded from the mouth of God unless there already existed in the world that rational, moral, storytelling creature that finds himself unable to live by bread alone.

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