

February 11, 2007

Meatfare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

If one looks for the "assured results" of modern biblical studies (and I think they are few), one of them seems to be a greater awareness that the theologians in Holy Scripture began with the revelatory events of history, not the contemplation of nature. That is to say, the human authors of Holy Scripture approached Creation itself through the path of Salvation History. They arrived at the knowledge of the Creator through their knowledge of the Lord of History. In the words of a modern scholar of the Bible, Israel went "from the God who saves to the God who creates" (*du Dieu qui sauve au Dieu qui crée*—Trophime Mouiren).

This historical progress of biblical revelation does not mean, surely, that God cannot be known through the study of created things. Indeed, Holy Scripture asserts exactly the opposite, declaring that God's "invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Romans 1:20; cf. Wisdom 13:1-7). Moreover, this "natural" revelation of God in His created works is very much a presumption of biblical apologetics (cf. Isaiah 42:5; Acts 17:22-24).

The essentially historical nature of divine revelation means, rather, that the biblical writers, even when they considered God as Creator, always identified that Creator as the Lord whom they first knew through His free and marvelous deeds of deliverance and covenant. It was the God of the holy Ark who created all things, declared Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:16; 2 Kings 19:15). It was the "Redeemer" that gave form to the child in the womb (Isaiah 44:24).

The Bible's understanding of history is the key, therefore, to its understanding of Creation. Just as the Lord's activity in history is free, redemptive, and covenantal, so is His act of creating. For this reason, biblical reflection on God's created world regards Creation itself as the medium of salvation and covenant. The Bible, consequently, resists all effort to let Creation "stand on its own." It never looks at the created world through the lens of a philosophical abstraction that de-historicizes the particular into the general. Revelation never declines into mere philosophy. Creation is as much a unique, singular event as the parting of the Red Sea or the call of Jeremiah. Moses refuses to succumb to Aristotelianism. The Bible's view of Creation is as innocent of causal determinism as its view of history.

Perhaps we may let Ben Sirach illustrate the point. "The sun looks down on everything with its light," he wrote, "and the work of the Lord is full of his glory. The Lord has not enabled his holy ones to recount all his marvelous works, which

the Lord the Almighty has established that the universe may stand firm in his glory" (Ecclesiasticus 42:16-17). God's glory, that is to say, is not revealed through man's abstract theories about Creation, but through the individual, concrete, created things themselves. Their very incomprehensibility, moreover, is revelatory. Indeed, says Sirach, even the saints are unable to recount all God's marvelous works.

Among those who have commented on this biblical passage over the centuries, I wonder if any demonstrated more insight than Thomas Aquinas, who invoked the text to illustrate the difference between biblical faith and philosophical discipline. Both faith and philosophy cast their regard on the created world, St. Thomas admits, but they do so very differently. The philosopher looks at a created thing according to its generic and formal qualities (*secundum quod huiusmodi*), whereas the *fides Christiana* looks at it, not in this abstract way, but rather "inasmuch as it represents the divine depth (*divinam altitudinem*) and is in some way ordered toward God Himself (*in ipsum Deum quoquo modo ordinatur*)."

Like the historical progression of the Bible, which goes from history to the created world, the "believer" (*fidelis*) starts with God revealed in history, not with the study of the created world. This distinction is what separates believer from the philosopher. The latter seeks the intrinsic causes of things (*ex propriis rerum causis*) in order to understand them, because understanding is the knowledge of things in their causes. The believer, on the contrary, starts with and proceeds from the First Cause in order to perceive created things as "divinely given, or as pertaining to the divine glory." The philosopher commences with the world that surrounds him, and he endeavors to grasp these things in their proper natures. The believer, however, begins with the historically revealed Lord, whose creative act, manifesting His glory, holds these things in existence (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 2.4).

I believe St. Thomas shows great insight here. If reflection on Creation is to be properly theological, it must begin with the God who reveals Himself in history through His deeds of deliverance and covenant. Deliverance and covenant must also confer shape on the lens for the Christian study of the created world. Otherwise *de Deo creante* will diminish into mere cosmology, . . . or worse. It may degenerate into the alleged objectivity and autonomy arbitrarily and imperiously demanded by the contemporary sciences. In contrast to all this, God's free and redemptive intervention in history opens the door to the orthodox understanding of His Creation.

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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

phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

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