

April 29, 2007

Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Long before He arrived in this world in human flesh, God's eternal Word came here through a human voice. That voice, conversing with Adam in the garden, Abraham in the desert, Moses on the mountain, and Isaiah in the temple, prepared the human race for God's final and definitive enfleshing in history, when "the angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit." His voice accustomed us to His presence. It was as though He had first taken our vocal chords before assuming our full human nature.

This feature of His birth in the flesh, moreover, also held true of the Lord's death in the flesh. Much as He sent this world prior notice of His coming, so He forewarned the netherworld too of His coming. That is to say, just as God's Word first came on earth in a human voice before appearing in human flesh, so before entering the realm of death in His flesh, He entered it first through His voice. He thus put hell on notice of His intent to storm it.

Hence, the Gospels record three occasions in which our Lord's voice preceded Him through the gates of death, in order to summon the return of those who had died. Moreover, in these three instances when Jesus raised the dead by His voice, it is possible to discern a certain calibration in His challenge to the netherworld, as it were, a growing intensity in the threat that the Author of life hurled into the realm of death.

First, there was the daughter of Jairus, who had died only immediately before. She had barely passed through the gates of death, so the Lord used only a soft and gentle call to summon her back, *Talitha, kum*—"Darling, arise" (Mark 5:41). One has almost the impression here that death may have failed to observe this intrusion, this subdued questioning of its power. After all, the little girl had only slightly crossed its border. Her body had not been moved from the place where she had breathed her last sigh. Hence, hardly more than the Lord's whisper was required to bring her back. Indeed, was the netherworld even aware that it had gained and lost possession of her soul?

Second, in the story of the son of the widow of Nain we see a greater lapse of time and space between death and the Lord's voice challenging death. The young man's body had already grown cold. As much as a day or so had passed, and he was even now being carried to the grave for burial. This time there was no mistaking the claims of death over the widow's son. This same voice of the Lord, nonetheless, augmented now with the vigor of command, penetrated the gates of death, "Young man, I say to you, arise" (Luke 7:14). The demons should have taken warning this time, for the threat against them was open and defiant. A Champion stood at the very gates, and the gates were beginning to tremble.

The third instance, however, went even further. Lazarus had been dead four days, more than enough time for someone to detect the stench of corruption. However hell reacted in the first two instances, this one should have left the demons in no doubt whatever. Less than a week before He entered it in triumph, the Lord's voice hurled His final challenge to the realm of death. There was no gentle summons this time, no quiet command for the dead to arise. On the contrary, says the Sacred Text, "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!'" (John 11:43) This roar of the Lion of Judah, thundering through the gates of death and vibrating its very depths, was the herald of the Lord's overwhelming arrival in hell one week later. He would then enter where His voice had prepared the way.

Such is the theme that the Church celebrates every year on Lazarus Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday, the theme found repeatedly in the texts of worship assigned for that day. Thus we sing in the Canon of the feast, "Calling Lazarus by name, Thou hast broken in pieces the bars of hell and shaken the power of the enemy; and before Thy crucifixion Thou hast made him tremble because of Thee, O only Savior." And again, "The palaces of hell were shaken, when in its depths Lazarus began once more to breathe, restored to life by the sound of Thy voice." And again, "'Woe is me! Now am I destroyed utterly!' hell cried out."

It is the remembrance of this thunderous, irresistible voice that fills the Christian heart with hope: "Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, And Christ will give you light" (Ephesians 5:14).

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