

June 3, 2007

All Saints' Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Whereas Muslims do so, I think Christians nowadays do not often speak of Jesus as a prophet. Indeed, except that the remark might be irreverent, one would almost say that Jesus is not honored as a prophet in His own country (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24; John 4:44).

It is not hard to see why this is the case. After all, "Prophet" did not become a defining title in the classical development of Christology, probably because in the Bible the term is more commonly used of others besides Jesus. Although I suppose no Christian would deny the prophetic ministry of Jesus, the title "prophet" is not usually considered specific enough to refer to Jesus.

Indeed, even when the New Testament calls Jesus a prophet, this title sometimes represents a lower stage, as it were, in the progress of Christological affirmations. This progression is perhaps clearest in the Gospel of John. For instance, when the Samaritan woman at the well calls Jesus a prophet (John 4:19), this is only an initial step toward His being called the Messiah (4:25-26) and the Savior of the world (4:42). Again, when the multiplication of the loaves prompts the confession of Jesus as a prophet (6:14), it is simply a preparation for his being confessed shortly afterwards as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (6:69). The same is true of the man born blind, who begins by affirming Jesus a prophet (9:17) and ends by believing in Him as "Son of God" (9:35-38). Indeed, in the Gospel of John people are divided between those that give Jesus the title of prophet and those that confess Him as Messiah (7:40-41), and John is in no doubt which title represents the superior profession of faith.

The mention of Jesus as prophet in the New Testament is, however, more subtle than it may at first appear. Close attention to that last Johannine reference, for instance, shows that Jesus is not called "a" prophet, but "the" prophet, and recourse to the definite article is found elsewhere in the New Testament with the same specific reference. Thus, when Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the crowd exclaims, "'This is Jesus, *the* prophet from Nazareth of Galilee" (Matthew 21:11).

That is to say, Jesus was not only misunderstood to be one of the ancient prophets raised to life again (Matthew 16:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 9:8,19), but he was also taken to be *the* prophet in a more specific sense. As a matter of fact, the Jews of that period were expecting not only the coming of the Messiah foretold by Isaiah, but also for the appearance of the prophet predicted by Moses: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear" (Deuteronomy 18:15). That expectation was demonstrated by the fact that John the Baptist was queried on the matter (John 1:21).

The earliest Christians were clear in their identification of Jesus with that prophet foretold in Deuteronomy. Thus, the Apostle Peter, exhorting the Sanhedrin to repentance in Jesus'

name, went on to quote the same passage in Deuteronomy as a proof text: "For Moses truly said to the fathers, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you'" (Acts 3:22). Stephen later cites these same words of Moses in reference to Jesus (7:37).

The Book of Revelation, moreover, in addition to the rich and varied titles by which it refers to Jesus, also portrays Him as dictating prophecies to the seven churches of Asia (1:18-3:22).

I suppose that the Muslim custom of calling Jesus a prophet suggests why Christians eventually stopped doing so. For Christians that title was simply not enough. "Prophet" was not sufficient to express what Christians most believed about Jesus. Indeed, already in the New Testament, the author of Hebrews contrasted the prophets with the *Son* (1:1-2).

It is no wonder, then, that the name "prophet" came to be somewhat neglected among the standard Christological titles common in the Church, especially in those liturgical texts that determine how ordinary Christians think about our Lord. The title "prophet" did not entirely disappear as a Christological title, nonetheless, particularly in reference to Moses' prediction in Deuteronomy (cf. the *Clementine Homilies* 3.15,53; John Chrysostom, *On Matthew* 17.4; *On John* 2.3; Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 66.72; Isidore of Pelusium, *Letters* 3.94; Cyril of Alexandria, *On John* 1.10).

Jesus, then, is the fulfillment not only Isaiah's prediction of the definitive king, but also of Moses' promise of the definitive prophet. He remains the true Prophet of the Church, God's authentic Spokesman, who deeply addresses the future and the final destiny of the human race.

©2007 Patrick Henry Reardon

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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php