

February 3, 2008

Sunday after the Lord's Presentation in the Temple

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The New Testament writers, when they speak of our Lord's "fulfillment" of biblical prophecies, normally indicate a particular point of correspondence between the words of a prophet and some event in the life and ministry of Jesus. Thus, the evangelist cites a prophetic text that he interprets as "fulfilled" in the return of the boy Jesus from Egypt (Matthew 2:15; Hosea 11:1). There are scores of such examples throughout all four gospels.

Moreover, this sustained template of "fulfillment through correspondence" is sometimes extended beyond the life of Jesus to the life of the Church. Luke, for instance, following an identical hermeneutic paradigm, regards a line of the Psalms as "fulfilled" in the choice of a new apostle to take the place of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:20; Psalms 108 [109]:8).

To non-Christian readers (and even to Christian readers overly influenced by non-Christian theories), these interpretations often seem curious, arbitrary, and even farfetched. For our part, we who accept the New Testament interpretations of biblical prophecies as authoritative components of Divine Revelation correctly and logically reject such characterizations.

Even we, nonetheless, are disposed to inquire about the origin and authority of the exegetical pattern followed by the Apostles and Evangelists. We find that pattern fully developed in the New Testament, but what was its source? What originally prompted the earliest Christian preachers and writers to go to the person and activity of Jesus in order to find points of correspondence with biblical prophecies?

It appears to me that the New Testament writers themselves indicate the source and warrant of that interpretive paradigm: It was the authority of Jesus. This fact seems obvious in the remembrance of the risen Christ, who, beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:27). Even as He sent His disciples out to evangelize the world, Jesus "opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (24:45). In short, Jesus was the informing source of such interpretation.

Even this theologically correct answer, however, seems to me not to exhaust the full dimensions of the inquiry, so let us consider some follow-up questions: What prompted Jesus to read and interpret biblical prophecies with sustained reference to Himself? Why was He disposed to regard those ancient writings as specifically referential to His own life and vocation?

Since they touch on the self-consciousness of the Son of God, such questions may at first strike the devout believer as bordering on irreverence. He senses that this is holy ground. On the other hand, relying on Chalcedon's assurance that the Son of God became "of one being [*homoousios*] with us," I suggest that we look at the matter more closely and with due reverence. Even as we take off our sandals, let us continue to approach the Bush.

Especially in Luke's Gospel there are indications that Jesus, as He "grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom" (2: 40), came gradually to understand the biblical writings as revealing the direction and structure of His own vocation.

On the first occasion when we know our Lord referred to God as "My Father," the context was a rabbinical discussion (2: 41-50). Now the subjects of such discussions were invariably drawn from Holy Scripture. Jesus was only twelve years old at the time, but already He was "sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions."

While those that heard Him "were astonished at His understanding and answers," I rather doubt that even they would have been able to follow the ideas taking shape in the mind of Jesus. Whatever biblical passages were under discussion that day, our young Lord evidently perceived those texts as directly pertinent to Himself and His personal vocation. Questioned on His behavior at the time, He spoke of this personal vocation: "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"

Mary and Joseph "did not understand the statement which He spoke to them," and evidently the Child Himself was yet in the process of learning. Immediately after this scene, in fact, we are again told that He "increased in wisdom," even as He grew into a man's stature (2: 52). Returning to Nazareth, Jesus continued to study the Scriptures and His own vocation.

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