

February 10, 2008
Sunday of the Canaanite Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

We are told that Jesus, returning to Nazareth at age twelve, "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:51-52). Surely we are right in supposing that an essential component of His increasing wisdom was a deepening concern for His "Father's business," a point rather prominent in His mind on that recent trip to Jerusalem (2:49).

We are likewise correct, surely, in supposing that Jesus' increasing wisdom had something to do with His further study of the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures were publicly read in the synagogue, where Jesus regularly attended—"as his custom was," *kata to eiothos avto*. Those same Scriptures, furthermore, were readily available for anyone who visited the synagogue to read them, and we do know that Jesus could read (4:16). He gained a proficiency in quoting the Bible, showing an early preference for Deuteronomy (Luke 4:4,8,12).

All of this goes to say, of course, that Jesus grew in familiarity with, and understanding of, Holy Scripture, specifically as it addressed His own life and mission. He *knew*, from His own self-consciousness, the meaning of the Scriptures: They had to do with *Him*.

We are certain of this, because on the first occasion when we know our Lord publicly read the Scriptures—a passage from Isaiah—His striking comment was, "Today this Scripture is *fulfilled* in your hearing" (4:21). Indeed, this Isaian text provided the entire program for the rest of Jesus' public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, / Because He has anointed Me / To preach the gospel to the poor; / He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, / To proclaim liberty to the captives / And recovery of sight to the blind, / To set at liberty those who are oppressed; / To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2).

I suggest there are two premises and two inferences especially to keep in mind with respect to Jesus' understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures.

First, there is what we may call a vertical premise—having to do with Jesus' personal relation to God. In the Scriptures, Jesus perceived His identity as the One sent forth by the Father to do His work on earth. Called upon to declare whether He was "the Coming One"—*Ho Erchomenos*—our Lord answered by referring to the scriptural fulfillment rendered visible in His ministry: "the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Luke 7:19-22). The Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus knew, held the key to Who He was and what He was about.

Jesus' understanding of the Bible was thus formed in the depths of His reflective self-awareness—the conscious knowledge of His identity in relation to the Father: "You are My beloved Son" (3:22). Our Lord's interpretation of Holy Scripture was inseparable from the knowledge of Himself as God's Son.

It is difficult to exaggerate the important inference to be drawn from this premise. To wit: inasmuch as the correct understanding of the Bible—Christian theology!—comes to us from our Lord (24:27,32,45), our own biblical exegesis is rooted in, and flows from, His reflective self-awareness. His knowledge of the Father, directing Him through the Scriptures, is the source of our theology. The Christian faith itself is an extension of "the mind of Christ"—*nous Christou* (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Second, there is what we may call a horizontal premise—having to do with history. Jesus perceived Himself as the point of biblical "fulfillment." This fulfillment was not to be found in some metaphysical, non-historical message, but in the drama of His own life and work. In His life He fulfilled, furthermore, not only the meaning of the Sacred Writings, but also the revelatory history recorded in, and further created by, those Writings. In addition, Jesus' fulfillment of Israel's history was of whole cloth with that history; it took place during specific years within the continuity of that history.

From this premise we Christians infer that the correct understanding of biblical history comes from Jesus' awareness of fulfilling it. Indeed, within the "mind of Christ" it is not entirely possible to distinguish between theology and the interpretation of history. To understand biblical history except through the Christological lens is a sure way to misunderstand it. Thus, Jesus' theological understanding of that history is the root of our history of theology.

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