

September 14, 2008
The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

As she celebrated the regard that God had shown to the lowliness of His Handmaiden, the Mother of the Lord explicitly recalled His mercy when "He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever" (Luke 1:55). The mention of what God said to Abraham is especially significant in this context, because it is directly related to what God said to the Mother of Jesus. There are several points of parallel.

First, the content of what God "spoke," in each case, had to do with Abraham's "seed." Both instances, that is to say, involved the assurance of the birth of a child of Abraham. Just as the history of the Chosen People began with such a promise, so did the era of the Christian Church.

Thus, God promised Abraham that "one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (Genesis 15:4). This promise was paralleled in the words of Gabriel, as he announced the coming Messiah: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son" (Luke 1:31).

Second, there is a further point of correspondence between the two cases in what we may call a "difficulty" in opposition to the promise. Nothing is really difficult for God, of course, but from a merely human perspective both promises appeared improbable. In the instance of Abraham, the difficulty especially had to do with the advanced years of both him and his wife. This thought, we are told, crossed Abraham's mind at the time: "Shall one be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah yet give birth, who is ninety years old?" (Genesis 17:17)

The Mother of Jesus, for her part, mentioned a similar consideration to the angel of promise: "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Luke 1:34) In both instances, we observe, the "difficulty" was raised in question form.

Third, in each case--Abraham and Mary--Sacred Scripture ascribes the conception of the promised child to work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, St. Paul, contrasting the promised Isaac with Ishmael, said the latter "was born according to the flesh," whereas the child of promise was born "according to the Spirit" (Galatians 4:23,29). With respect to the promised Jesus, the angel declared to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). Both the barrenness of Sarah and the virginity of Mary provided the occasion for the outpouring of God's power on human inadequacy. The Holy Spirit, that is to say, is the "Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13).

Fourth, in each case a true faith received the promise of God. Abraham's response to God in faith is much celebrated in God's Word, which says, "he believed the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6; 1 Maccabees 2:52; Romans 4:3,9; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). With regard to Mary, her cousin Elizabeth first discerned her faith, when she proclaimed, "Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45).

Fifth, in the stories of Abraham and Mary, attention is paid to the form in which each of them sought further information when they received God's promise. Commenting on the two stories, St. Augustine observed a similarity that joined them. He remarked that Abraham's question--"how shall I know?"--came after the assertion that "Abraham believed the Lord" (Genesis 15:6,8). That is to say, Abraham's query did not arise from doubt, but from a desire for further information with respect to God's will.

This feature is also found in the story of Mary, inasmuch as she, too, requested more information about her responsibilities in the future living out of her faith: "She was certain [*certa erat*] what the future held, though she sought how it would happen [*modum quo fieret*]." Neither of them doubted the promise, wrote Augustine, but both needed more enlightenment. They did not ask in unbelief but within the context of their faith (*The City of God* 16.24).

Both Abraham and Mary--each at the beginning of a new era in the history of salvation--received the humanly improbable promise of the child whose conception and birth would inaugurate that era. Abraham's daughter, joining both Testaments, thus appears as the new and outstanding example of that same faith through which Abraham himself was reckoned righteous.

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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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
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