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The Prophet Baruch

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Depending on the persons to whom it is addressed, the Christian Gospel is readily divided into three parts. This division is sequential, involving stages, and all three have to do with membership in the Church.

First, to those *outside* the Church the Gospel is directed as the announcement of salvation and the summons to repentance. In this context the Gospel is (to translate Hebrews 6:1 quite strictly) "the word of the beginning," *ho tes arches logos*. This is the Gospel as kerygma, or announcement, and it deals with such elementary matters as "the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment" (6:1-2). The process initiated in this stage of the Gospel is the catechumenate, and its sacramental fulfillment is Baptism, "for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Second, to those *inside* the Church the Gospel is directed as didache, or doctrine, and paraklesis, or exhortation, the summons to "increase and abound in love to one another and to all" (1 Thessalonians 3:12), to "abound in everything-in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence" (2 Corinthians 8:7), "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12).

This is the Gospel as *theologia*, the more intimate knowledge of God from *inside* the house of salvation, the repeated extension of the believer's finger to know the place of the nails. The sacramental fulfillment of this Gospel proclamation is the Holy Eucharist, in which "we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Third, to those who are passing into glory the Gospel is directed as the completion of the Christian life: "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). This is the Gospel in its utter fullness, "for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

And inasmuch as sacraments involve signs and representations, there is no sacramental mode to this proclamation of the Gospel. In this third stage of the Gospel proclamation the Church gathers without the medium of symbols, to chant to the Lamb, "You were slain and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

Within the Scriptures we find all three forms of the Gospel, sometimes with respect to exactly the same theme or image. Let us take, for instance, the Good Shepherd.

In the Gospel of Luke, the theme of the Good Shepherd pertains to the first stage of the Gospel, the conversion and return of the sinner. The Good Shepherd here goes

after the one sheep that is lost until He finds it, and when He has found it, He lays it on His shoulders rejoicing, and when He comes home, He calls together His friends (Luke 15:4-6). That is to say, He brings the sheep into the Church. This is the Gospel that Ananias preached to Paul: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:1).

Expressed in Baptism, the Gospel's first stage is also the first fulfillment of the prophetic hope expressed by the Psalmist: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 22 [23]:2-3).

In the Gospel of John, on the other hand, the theme of the Good Shepherd pertains to the Gospel's second stage, the knowledge of God *within* the flock, where "I know My sheep, and am known by My own. . . . My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life" (John 10:14,27-28). This recognition of the Shepherd's voice, calling each of His sheep by name (10:3), is the grace given to Mary Magdalene, for instance. Only when the Shepherd addresses Mary by her own name does she recognize His voice (20:16). This experience describes the life within the Church, where believers daily attend to the modulations of the Shepherd's call.

Perfected in the Eucharist, it is the second fulfillment of the prophetic hope expressed by the Psalmist: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psalms 22 [23]:5-6).

In the Book of Revelation the theme of the Good Shepherd pertains to the third stage of the Gospel, the realm of eternal glory. Here the Good Shepherd is portrayed as one of the flock, "for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to the living fountains of water" (Revelation 7:17). As the entrance into heaven, this is the final fulfillment of the hope expressed by the Psalmist: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalms 22 [23]:6).

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