

November 2, 2008

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Asaph the Seer, as he contemplates the works of Creation, perceives both conflict and covenant. In the poem that he devotes to this double consideration (Psalm 74 in Hebrew, 73 in Greek and Latin), he moves back and forth between these two themes, but my prose analysis of the poem is better served, I believe, by taking them in sequence. I propose to start where Asaph starts: with conflict.

The current state of Creation, Asaph perceives, is a constant fight against chaos. He begins his meditation, then, by wondering out loud whether God has cast off---in anger and forever---the sheep of His pasture. The poet returns to this theme repeatedly, distressed that those who hate God are glorified. He is bewildered that the sanctuary is destroyed, and he is scandalized that blasphemy walks the earth unchecked. Chaos prevails without reprieve, with neither sign nor prophet to contradict it. What can the just man do but lament and pray for deliverance?

As he laments, however, Asaph reflects that the very act of Creation was a deed of deliverance. Making things from nothing, the Lord did battle. Nothingness was not neutral. Existence is not natural to nothingness. God, therefore, conquered a force perverse to His purpose. Centuries before parting the Red Sea, He divided more ancient waters, cleaving the fountains and the flood, cracking open the multiple heads of the sea monster in order to feed, with their meat, the peoples of Ethiopia. Creation, that is to say, was the initial Exodus, a deliverance from bondage, a redemption from the deep dungeon of non-being. The Lord smote that more ancient Pharaoh and fed him to His hungry creatures.

Creation, then, was a both moral and metaphysical act. The Lord imposed a moral order in the very act of conferring a metaphysical form. When the Lord took hold on the *tohu wabohu* and invoked His light over the darkness of the abyss, He wrought salvation in the midst of the earth. He did this in the sense that in the very heart of Creation, its *arche* or principle, there is a deed of redemption, the world's deliverance from the oppression of primeval chaos.

Consequently, it is to that very ancient deliverance that Asaph appeals when He prays God to rise once more in vindication of His cause against the wicked and the daily blasphemer.

In making this prayer, the poet explicitly invokes a covenant inherent in the act

of Creation. *Respice in testamentum Tuum*, he pleads, "Look upon Thy covenant." He means the covenant which man, when he entered the world on Creation's sixth day, found already in place. This covenant's preamble had been composed on the second day, when the Lord, with a firmament, divided the waters. The first article of the covenant was composed on the third day when the dry land appeared and began to grow food for those who were to live upon it.

This covenant of Creation, necessary for all the subsequent covenants of salvation history, was formulated for the sake of man. It gave initial shape to the congregation that God possessed from of old, the rod of the inheritance that He redeemed, even as He dried up the rivers of Ethan and destroyed the demon of the deep. By reason of this covenant, Asaph reflects, God is our king before the ages.

On the fourth day, the Lord inscribed into His covenant the possibility of history, by placing a chronometer into the composition of the universe: "Thine is the day, and Thine is the night. Thou hast crafted--- *Tu fabricatus es*---the dawn and the sun." This chronological shape of existence, too, was intended for the sake of man, the only creature able to reflect on the measure and meaning of time.

In the covenant of Creation, then, God formed both space and time, consecrating the first by His sanctuary and the second by the liturgical calendar.

Of all the evils lamented by Asaph, therefore, the worst are the desecrations of sacred space and sacred time. God's enemies destroyed the first with ax and fire, the second by the suppression (*quiescere faciamus*) of feast days. Man becomes the Lord's enemy in the space dedicated for worship (*inimicus in Sancto*) and glorifies himself in the sacred time set aside to glorify God (*in medio solemnitatis Tuae*). Both space and time are thus defiled. Man, by this desecration of his life, returns Creation to the primeval chaos. Living outside the covenant inherent in structure of the world, he endeavors to undo what God has done.

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