

April 26, 2009

St. Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Even as we insist that the eternal Word assumed the concrete circumstances of an individual human life, becoming a subjective participant in human history, the redemptive significance of the Incarnation is rooted, not in the individuality of Jesus' life, but in the general and common human nature He shares with the rest of us.

Indeed, in the New Testament one finds no impulse to treat Jesus as an "exceptional" man, as the world understands such a one: a heroic figure who rises above his contemporaries to answer the call of destiny.

Jesus is treated, rather, as one of us, our "brother." This is very different from the way their contemporaries regarded Caesar, Alexander the Great, and other "exceptional" men. Such figures were not usually thought of as mere "brothers" to the rest of humanity. They were, on the contrary, the *virii illustres et clarissimi*. Although Plutarch's *Lives* of famous Greeks and Romans was a work roughly contemporary with the composition of the gospels, its sundry biographies bear not the slightest resemblance to the gospels.

In fact, Jesus actively discouraged men from thinking about Him in that way. He even manifested a reluctance to be called the Messiah (cf. Mark 8:29-30), inasmuch as that term had come to signify military and political ascendancy.

Moreover, Jesus deliberately assumed the role of a servant among those who followed Him (John 13:4), precisely to discourage them from imitating the "rulers over the Gentiles" (Mark 10:42).

The biblical emphasis on the "common" quality of the Lord's humanity, on the other hand, indicated more than an ethical preference on His part. His complete solidarity with the rest of the human race was a condition, rather, of His ability to *redeem* the human race. Such was the force, I believe, of the reference to Jesus as "born of a woman" in Paul's account of the Son's coming "to *redeem* those under the Law" (Galatians 4:4-5).

This solidarity of God's Son with our humanity---in order to redeem humanity--gives structure to the argument made in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (2:14-15).

This biological solidarity with the rest of humanity is what prompts the author of Hebrews to speak of Jesus as our "brother": "He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: 'I will declare Your name to My brethren'" (2:11).

Our Lord's oneness with mankind, however, is more than biological. He is not called a "brother" as the rest might bear that title. On the contrary, He has identified Himself with human beings in the special sense of being their historical representative---their definitive spokesman. Indeed, in the Gospel of Matthew, this special sense of Jesus' "brotherhood" pertains directly to eschatology. At the end of history, all human beings-"all the nations" (25:32)-will be judged on the basis of their brotherhood with Jesus: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did to one of the least of these My brethren, you did to Me" (25:40).

This was an extraordinary claim for any human being---the claim to be the final arbiter of history---and on the basis of His having lived as a participant within history! Clearly, the early Christians appreciated the uniqueness of that claim. St. Paul announced that God "has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained" (Acts 17:31). He was equally clear on the point in his epistles: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10; cf. many manuscripts of Romans 14:10).

In summary, early Christian reflection on the humanity of the Word was complex and not all of one piece. Christian thinkers, even as they portrayed the humanity of God's Word as individual and personal, likewise stressed that it was of the very nature shared with all other human beings. The Word's oneness with the human race was regarded as the condition of His ability to redeem the human race. In addition, the Lord's shared humanity provided the criterion for the final evaluation of human history itself.

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