

**May 3, 2009**

The Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearers

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

A special circumstance of the Incarnation was that Jesus had no biological father.

The New Testament is not theoretical on the point; it does not argue, for instance, that Jesus could *not* have had an earthly father. It simply records that Jesus *did* not have an earthly father. In making that assertion---which was in no way regarded as evidence of a defective humanity in Jesus---the New Testament argues solely from fact, not theory.

Indeed, it is passing curious that both the New Testament authors asserting this fact (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35) also go to some length to trace the lineage of Jesus, not through His mother, but through Joseph, whom neither writer regarded as Jesus' father (Matthew 1:2-16; Luke 3:23-38).

To speak of the Lord's not having a human father, the Church early adopted the adjective *apator*, "fatherless." The first Christian use of this term appears in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which compares Jesus and Melchizedek. Of the latter the author of Hebrews observes that in the Old Testament, he is portrayed as "without father [*apator*], without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life." In these respects, says Hebrews, Melchizedek, "like the Son of God, remains a priest continually" (7:3).

Thus, *apator* became a common expression to speak of Jesus in His humanity. Used in this sense, one finds the term in countless liturgical texts, as well as the Fathers of the Church (e.g., Gregory the Theologian, *Orationes Theologicae* 30.21; John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Hebraeos* 12.1).

As applied to Melchizedek, of course, the expression *apator* was only figurative, whereas with regard to Jesus, it is understood literally. In fact, in not having a human father, Jesus resembled only one other man recorded in the Bible: Adam!

This shared feature may have inspired the beginning of Christian reflection on Jesus as the New Adam or Second Adam. That is to say, it was perceived that Adam and Jesus represented---in very different ways---distinct "beginnings," both of them fatherless fathers of the human race.

To appreciate the sense in which Jesus is called the New Adam, it is useful to reflect on the significance of the Old Adam in the Hebrew Scriptures:

Adam's very name is the noun normally used in the Old Testament to mean "mankind" or "the human race." When *'adam* refers to individuals, these individuals tend to be representative of humanity as such. Thus, "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no guilt" (Psalms 32 [31]:2). Because of this generic nuance, *'adam* is never pluralized in Hebrew.

The extensive use of this noun in the Hebrew Bible---562 times and in every major source and era---is convincing evidence of the Old Testament's abiding interest in the whole human race, and not simply the Jews. The radical unity of the human experience is the presupposition---not only of the Psalms, Job, and the other Wisdom literature---but also of the Chronicler, the Priestly and Deuteronomic writings, the Prophets, and even the earlier Pentateuchal sources. Fritz Maass has called this common anthropology---shared over so long a period and among such varied literary works---"unique in the history of ideas."

It is important to make this point, because the universalist anthropology of the New Testament might otherwise seem to represent a discontinuity between the two Testaments. The very opposite is true: the New Testament's teaching of God's universal redemption is continuous with the Old Testament's appreciation of the radical unity of the human race.

On the other hand, there is also a very dark side to this unity---namely, the Fall. The use of *'adam* as the proper name of the original human being (Genesis 4:25; 5:1-5; 1 Chronicles 1:1) indicates that the whole human race was embodied and signified in his person. Adam was humanity in its wholeness. For this reason, the disobedience of Adam was in truth the Fall of the human race as such. Human nature and human history, transmitted from the person and flesh of that first father, were thus burdened with the heritage of death, rebellious alienation from God, and bondage to demons. We *all* fell in Adam. We absolutely needed a *new* beginning!

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