

October 4, 2009

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One rarely hears modern Christians speak of our Lord's redemptive work as an outpouring of the divine anger, but most assuredly it was. Indeed, far from being an appeasement of the divine anger, the battle waged by the crucified Christ was an expression of it---God's wrath against the demonic forces of evil, which enslaved His servants.

In mystic vision the prophet beheld Christ covered in bloodstained garments, coming from the combat of the Cross, striding from the victory over His enemies: "I have trodden the winepress alone, / And from the peoples no one was with Me. / For I have trodden them in My anger, / And trampled them in My fury. . . . For the day of vengeance is in My heart, / And the year of My redeemed has come. . . . Therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me; / And My own fury sustained Me" (Isaiah 63: 1-6).

The Cross was the place of conquest, where Jesus delivered us from satanic bondage. Calvary was the scene of combat, and true combat normally involves some component of wrath---here, the wrath of God. The redemptive deed of Christ was the supreme and ultimate instance of warfare ever waged in this world. Indeed, the struggle of Christ on the Cross was truly the battle to end all strife, for it introduced into human history the key to its final and definitive peace.

This thought, I suggest, provides a fitting entrance into Psalm 75 (76), which begins: "God is known in Judah; His name is great in Israel. His dwelling is in Salem, and His abode in Zion. For there did He break the power of the bow, the armor, the sword, and the battle."

Because of its sustained reference to the work Jesus wrought on the Cross, an ancient Christian custom prescribed Psalm 75 (76) to be prayed each Friday, the day of our Redemption. This was, after all, the day on which the Lord rose up in judgment---ascended the Cross!---against His demonic enemies: "For you are terrifying, and who can defy You, when Your wrath is aroused. From heaven You caused judgment to be heard."

This voice of the divine judgment was certainly heard just days before Christ mounted the Cross. Answering the prayer that the Father would glorify His name, that voice of thunder replied, "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again." It was in response to this voice that Jesus declared, ""This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out."

Jesus proceeded to identify the hour of this impending judgment as the time of His crucifixion: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." Removing every doubt about the meaning of "lifted up," the evangelist John commented, "This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (John 12:27-33). When Jesus made "peace by the blood of His Cross" (Colossians 1:20), "the ruler of this world" was cast out, and his weapons were broken--- his bow, his armor, his sword, and his chariots.

Our psalm tells what occurred on Calvary, when "God rose up unto judgment, / To save the meek of the earth." Namely, "the earth trembled." The evangelist described this trembling of the earth: "the earth quaked, and the rocks were split." Indeed, as though to signify man's sudden liberation from the forces of death, "the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:51-52). The dying Lord violently shook the earth in order to loosen the grip of the grave, to facilitate the universal resurrection, thus "to save the meek of the earth."

Evoking the overthrow of Pharaoh's army, our psalm describes how the Lord, with fire and fury, shook the earth and conquered His foes: "Wondrously You blaze forth from the eternal mountains, and all the foolish of heart are thrown into confusion. All the men of wealth slept their sleep, nor found ought left in their hands. At Your rebuke, O God of Jacob, the riders of horses were put to rest." Even as He dies on the Cross, the Church sees Jesus already victorious, descending to the realm of death, with majesty and might, to trample down the demonic lords of the underworld. Such is the burden of this psalm.

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