

March 28, 2010

Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Prosopon, a word sometimes used by the Church Fathers in reference to those who "speak" in Holy Scripture, had a long history as a literary and theatrical term. Its original meaning, "face" (as in Homer, *Odyssey* 19.361), had been adapted to the stage, to mean the mask worn by the actor who portrayed some dramatic character (cf. Demosthenes, *Orations* 19.287). From that reference it was a short step for *prosopon* to signify the character himself-the "part" played by the actor (cf. Epictetus, *Dissertations* 1.29.45).

Perhaps the theatrical mask accounts for the word's Latin equivalent, *persona*, which may indicate a "sound coming through." In any case, *persona* in classical Latin was normally a stage term, which is still preserved in our expression "persons of the drama," *personae dramatis*.

The theatrical sense of *prosopon* was very familiar to the early Christians. We find it in Origen, for example: "Actors in a theatrical drama are not what they say they are or what they seem to be, in accord with the character (*prosopon*) they assume" (*On Prayer* 20.2). This word (as well as a variant, *prosopeion*) often has the same meaning in Athanasius, Basil, Chrysostom, and others.

Justin Martyr's adaptation of this theatrical term to the understanding of biblical literature suggests a perception that Holy Scripture is the presentation of a *drama*. (It is worth observing that Theodoret of Cyr uses this Greek word, "drama," in reference to Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb [*On 2 Kings*, quest. 24; *On Isaiah* 3.9].) If the term be allowed, the Bible is the Lord's libretto in the enactment of history.

This dramatic quality of Holy Scripture is most obvious in the Psalms, I believe, because of their enhanced sense of immediacy. In the Psalter, biblical narrative takes on a more personal and existential quality. I may manage, for example, to put some distance between David and me, when I read of his flight from the clutches of Saul, but to recite his psalm on that occasion places me directly into David's sandals. *I* am no longer safe from the machinations of Saul! David's words become my script: "The sorrows of the nether world surrounded me, the snares of death confronted me" (Psalm 18 [17]:5; 2 Samuel 22:6).

In praying this psalm, I assume the voice of David. I thus take on---in dramatic form---the character of that persecuted just man, and I identify myself with the Suffering Servant, of whom David was a prefiguration---the Man who "made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:20).

When I recite the lines of this psalm, in short, its meaning is not reduced to the things that happen to be going on in my individual life. I am playing a part, rather, in the larger and transforming drama of redemption. The paltry circumstances of my own existence are subsumed, through this prayer, into the ongoing history of God's People. I may study the Psalms as *gramma*, but I must pray them as *drama*.

Already in the New Testament, we observe the recognition of various "voices" in the psalms. Thus, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews declares that the Father spoke to His Son in the words of a psalm: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (1:8; Psalms 45 [44]:6).

Moreover, this same author asserts, the voice of God's Son, as though in the very moment of the Incarnation, used a psalm to address His Father: "Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure.' Then I said, 'Behold, I have come---In the volume of the book it is written of Me---to do Your will, O God'" (10:5-7; Psalms 40 [39]:6-8).

When we pray such psalms, then, the words are not spoken in our own voice. We put on, rather, what St. Paul called "the mind of Christ." Through the inspired lines of the Psalter, the Holy Spirit inserts our prayer into the conversation---the *dialogia*---of the Father and the Son. This form of prayer is not some sort of mental juggling but the Holy Spirit's elevation of the mind: "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Spirit teaches, deliberating (*sygkrinontes*) spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Corinthians 2:13,16).

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