

November 27, 2011

Second Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Since the theology of Redemption takes its rise from the Gospel itself, it is reasonable to start with the Gospel in order to discern its direction, method, structure, and content.

The Apostle Paul indicated this approach when he described his initial message to the Corinthians: "I delivered to you---as of primary importance---that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The apostolic preaching did not simply declare the soteriological significance of Jesus' death and Resurrection; it specifically did so "according to the Scriptures." That is to say, an explicit reference to the Old Testament was contained in the content of the Gospel. It was an integral part of the proclamation. Paul would have regarded the omission of the Hebrew Scriptures as a defect in the apostolic message.

If this is true of the Gospel, it must also be true of a soteriology based on the Gospel. An authentic theology of Redemption will be---"as of primary importance"---exegetical. It will investigate the death and Resurrection of Christ in a specific way; namely, "according to the Scriptures."

In making this point in 1 Corinthians, Paul gave prescriptive form to the soteriological approach we already find all through the literary evidence left us by the apostles and the apostolic churches. For now, I limit our consideration to just two texts:

First, when the Apostle Peter set himself to convey the meaning of Jesus' death and Resurrection to the assembled crowds on the morning of Pentecost, he appealed to the testimony of the Scriptures; specifically, to Psalms 16 [15]:8-11 and 110 [109]:1 (Acts 2:23-35). Instinctively, as it were, Peter interpreted the redemptive work of Christ "according to the Scriptures."

Second, when the Church incorporated the theme of Redemption into her worship, this incorporation included images and expressions drawn from the ancient Scriptures. A very early example is in the hymn fragment quoted by the Apostle Paul, when he wrote of "Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be seized, but he emptied himself, assuming the form of a bondservant, coming in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:5-7). In the primitive soteriology of this hymn, we discern

references both to Genesis, where disobedient Adam sought equality with God, and to the Book of Isaiah, where God's obedient Servant emptied himself.

In both these New Testament texts---which I take to be typical of the soteriology in the apostolic period---the Old Testament serves as the interpretive lens. It provides direction, method, structure, and content to the theology of Redemption.

In the Church's impulse to search the Hebrew Scriptures for the understanding of Redemption, we should see, not only the quest to identify objective prophetic references, but also the effort to discern the subjective "mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Authentic theology is an extension of the mind of Christ; it begins with understanding the revealed Scriptures as Jesus understood them. There is one and only one reason Christian theology investigates the Hebrew Scriptures to grasp the meaning of Redemption: it is what Jesus did.

In other words, the Old Testament and the redemptive work of Christ are not related simply by way of objective semantic reference, but through the living subjective experience of the Redeemer. The conjunction of the Sacred Text and the redemptive event was originally discerned in the active, reflecting conscience of Jesus of Nazareth, who found in the words of the Hebrew Bible the Father's personal summons to obedience.

In the very act of commissioning the Gospel, Jesus elaborated this personal understanding of the Holy Scriptures for the benefit of the Church (cf. Luke 24:45-47).

Even before his Passion, however, he intimated certain aspects of this understanding. Perhaps the clearest example of this intimation is found in the words of the Eucharistic Institution: "This is my body which is given for you. . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you." In these words, Jesus had recourse to thematic imagery from Exodus and the Book of Isaiah, in order to interpret his celebration of "this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15-20).

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