

December 25, 2011

The Nativity of our Lord

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Rather early the Christian mind began to ask, "Why did God become man?" The Council of Nicaea declared simply that the Incarnation took place "for us men and for our salvation." That is to say, it is a defined dogma of the Church that the intent of the Incarnation was soteriological: God became man in order to save us.

Over the centuries, there has been a certain diversity in the ways this soteriological intent of the Incarnation was expressed. More specifically, the answer to the question "Why God became man?" depended in some measure on the meaning of salvation, and Christians, even from New Testament times, have described salvation in somewhat different ways.

The soteriological intent of the Incarnation was expressed very early in the Epistle to the Hebrews. According to this source, the Incarnation provided God's Son with the means of suffering and dying in obedience to His Father. Commenting on Psalm 39 (40), the author wrote with respect to the Incarnation, "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).

That is to say, the obedience of Christ was to fulfill and replace the various sacrifices of the Mosaic Law, and for this task the Son obviously required a body. The Son needed this body in order to suffer and die for the human race. Thus, commenting on Psalm 8, the author of Hebrews described in what way the Son became man for our salvation. "We see Jesus," he wrote, "who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that he, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" (2:9).

In order to "taste death" in obedience to the Father, then, the Son assumed our flesh. In order to die as an act of sacrifice, he had to share the mortality of our flesh. Hebrews goes on to say, "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."

In sum, two aspects of the soteriology of the Incarnation are especially to be observed in treatment of the theme in Hebrews: First, God's Son assumed our

flesh in order obediently to die in that flesh. Second, his death in the flesh meant the destruction of the devil, "who had the power of death." According to Hebrews, then, God's Son took flesh in order to die, and he died in order to overcome death and the devil.

This line of theological reflection---Incarnation, death, victory---continued throughout Christian history, combining with other biblical themes along the way.

In the following century, for instance, Irenaeus, the second bishop of Lyons, followed the same theological line as the author of Hebrews, but he adorned it by introducing the Pauline contrast between Christ and Adam. According to Irenaeus the Word's assumption of the flesh was required for our salvation because Adam's sin had been committed in the flesh. Sin in the flesh required salvation in the flesh.

Irenaeus explained, "So the Word was made flesh in order that sin, destroyed by means of that same flesh through which it had gained mastery and taken hold and lorded it, should no longer be in us," and "that so He might join battle on behalf of our forefathers and vanquish through Adam what had stricken us through Adam" (*Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 31).

In his treatment of salvation Irenaeus also stresses the resurrection much more explicitly than is obvious in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and this emphasis, in turn, colors his approach to the Incarnation. Thus, Irenaeus writes of "our Lord's birth, which the Word of God underwent for our sake, to be made flesh, that he might reveal the resurrection of the flesh and take the lead of all in heaven." In this way, explains Irenaeus, Christ became "the first-born of the dead, the head and source of the life unto God" (*op.cit.*, 39).

©2011 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php