

January 8, 2012

The Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Prior to the calling of Abraham, God provided the human race with certain introductory instruction through the deep perceptions of three patriarchs: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. In what Holy Scripture says of these men, we discern the initial steps of human education.

First, Abel examined the structure of the world around him and reached the conclusion "that things which are seen were not made by things which do appear." The "thing-ness" of the world, that is to say, was not self-explanatory. The world was not its own cause. On the contrary, it gave "evidence of things not seen." Abel's probing mind, gazing at this visible world, laid hold on certain invisible truths.

Chief among these, I suppose, were the simplest rational principles (such as causality and non-contradiction) and the basic axioms and elementary theorems of the mathematical order. These interests emerged from the intellect's encounter with empirical data. Abel's mind perceived in matter an explanatory reference, and this perception laid the foundation for logical discipline and, in due course, metaphysics.

It is not without interest to reflect that Abel was a shepherd; the pastoral life was eminently compatible with the leisured intellectual exertion required for mathematics and metaphysics. Standing guard over his flock, as it grazed on the grass of the fields, Abel sought deeper nourishment from a greener pasture. He sharpened the earliest human hunger for "the substance of things hoped for."

In the first generation that followed man's alienation from God, then, Abel took the first human step back in the direction of Eden. In the world of things seen, he perceived God's most basic self-testimony. This spiritual perception was an act of faith, in which Abel understood that "the worlds were framed by the word of God."

Abel's thought was followed by that of Enoch, who discerned the moral structure of existence. It was clear to Enoch, not only that God is, but also that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him." To the deductions of mathematics, therefore, and the insights of metaphysics, Enoch added the requirements of the moral order. He perceived that whatever separated true from false also separated good from evil.

In the transition from Abel to Enoch we trace the noetic step from the invisible

things clearly seen to the law written in the heart---man's conscience bearing witness to his responsibility. Just as Abel discerned the human mind as the locus where the universe learned the truth about itself, Enoch perceived in the human conscience the classroom where the universe was instructed about right and wrong.

The biographies of Abel and Enoch testify that neither man lived very long. The first was driven from this world by a violent human hand, and the second was summoned forth by a divine impatience, unwilling to wait longer for the delight of his company.

Since neither thinker remained long on the earth, it fell to a third patriarch to discover the moral structure of history; this discovery requires a bit more time. Living longer than Abel and Enoch, Noah carried their teachings to his consideration of culture and human affairs. If Abel was a metaphysician and Enoch a moralist, Noah was a prophet.

Tutored by the patriarchal tradition, which affirmed that God is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him, the observant and logical Noah became certain that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness." Metaphysics and the moral order drove his mind to the necessity of the retributive *eschata*. Evil was unnatural; it could not go on indefinitely. Driven by the fear such a perception engendered in his soul, Noah got busy and "prepared an ark to the saving of his house."

Thus, in the three major patriarchs who followed the Fall, the human mind was enabled to grasp the true structure and significance of the world, to lay hold on the moral foundations of reality, and to act on a correct understanding of human events.

In this progression, humanity was duly prepared for the vocation of Abraham. Even as he dwelt in tents with Isaac and Jacob, Abraham was the heir of a thorough and intense tutelage. Though he left Ur not knowing whither he went, he was in no doubt about the universe---and university---he came from.

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