

August 12, 2012

Sunday After Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although repentance is profitable to the soul, Holy Scripture does not regard it as sufficient to undo the historical effects of sin. That is to say, by repentance I can change the course of my life---and my eternal destiny---but the bad things I have done, and the good things left undone, will still continue to run on their own. My repentance will not undo them as actions in history. Such is the practical meaning, I take it, of the adage, *factum non fit non factum*—"a thing done cannot become a thing not done." It can be repented of, it can be forgiven, but it cannot be undone.

This truth about repentance was made clear at the discovery of the Deuteronomic Scroll in 622 before Christ. When this document caused Josiah and his friends to realize how far Judah had wandered into sin, they immediately repented. The prophetess Huldah, consulted on this matter, assured them that the Lord accepted their repentance, but she also warned that their repentance would not avert the historical effects of so much sin. The accumulated transgressions of numerous generations would still bring about the destruction of the nation. Indeed, part of Josiah's repentance was an acceptance of the divine judgment on the nation.

Indeed, I believe an integral component of repentance is the grace to leave in God's provident hands the historical judgment of the manifold evil effects of our sins. We repentant sinners must make such amends as we can (cf. Luke 19:8), but none of us can even know---much less avert---all the evil consequences our sins have unleashed in history. These things have already taken on a historical dynamism of their own, and God will deal with them according to His own wise judgment.

This truth about repentance is pertinent, not only to the bad things we have done, but also to the required good things we have failed to do. Only in our later years---long after we made the major decisions that governed our lives---do some of us come to realize how many possibilities we have squandered and how few duties we have fulfilled. But now it is too late; our education is long over, our children have already been raised, further opportunities are few and diminishing by the hour, and our neglected friends lie cold in the tomb.

We find ourselves unable to undo any of it. We weep, with Joel, for "the years the locust hath consumed, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm." We are obliged simply to accept the judgment of God, following the insight of the Psalmist: *iudicia Domini vera, iustificata in semetipsa*---"the judgments of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether."

Repentance, then, as a turning from sin to God, involves more than a release from personal guilt. It means, also, handing over to the Lord's judgment and providential care the countless historical effects of our myriad failures. That is to say, repentance places not only our individual lives but also our larger destiny---the myriad links that join us to the rest of mankind---under God's sovereign governance of history. Repentance makes us *participes rei*, sharers of a thing vastly larger than ourselves.

Josiah's death at Megiddo in 609, a bare thirteen years after the discovery of the Deuteronomic Scroll, was the beginning of all the punishments Judah would undergo as the binding historical legacy of its many infidelities. Jeremiah saw it and wept; Habakkuk saw it and trembled.

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