

September 2, 2012

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the Synoptic Gospels situated during Holy Week a series of altercations between Jesus and his enemies, they included an episode in which Jesus took the initiative. After those enemies had repeatedly failed to confound him, he turned on them and asked: "How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the Son of David? For David himself said by the Holy Spirit: 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies Your footstool.' Therefore David himself calls him 'Lord'; how, then, is he his son?"(Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44)

We are told that this question stumped them: "And no one was able to answer him a word, nor did anyone, from that day on, dare to question him any more" (Matthew 22:46). Unfortunately, not everyone has followed their example. Some commentators on this text venture the view that Jesus was employing a kind of exegetical legerdemain to trip up his adversaries, and they go on to claim that the Savior of the world would not be able to get away with that sort of move nowadays, when "we know so much more about the early history of the Psalter."

Other (and better) exegetes of the text remark that Jesus' appeal to this psalm was an implicit claim to personal divinity. Fair enough, but I believe this approach, too, needs refinement.

I am impressed by the form in which Jesus makes this "implicit claim"---the interrogative form: "How, then, is he his son?" This is not a rhetorical question; it is a real interrogation, supposing a real answer, and Jesus' opponents are stumped because they do not know the answer. Do we?

Even the "better" exegetes of this text seem to imagine that Jesus asked, "Why does David call his son, 'Lord'?" And they answer, "Because the Messiah, in addition to being a descendent of David, is also God's eternal Son, and therefore David's Lord." All true, but this answer addresses a different question. Jesus did not inquire, "Why?" He asked, "How?"

This question, I submit, lies at the heart of a dilemma faced at Chalcedon in 451. Pope Leo I of Rome, the chief theological architect of that council, summarized the Chalcedonian thesis by referring to the Gospel text under consideration: "David's Lord became his son, and from the fruit of the promised

branch sprang the faultless one, the twofold nature coming together is a single person" (*Sermons* 28.3).

In this assertion Leo proved himself a disciple of Augustine of Hippo, who had laid the foundations of Chalcedonian Christology during the previous generation (*De Trinitate* 1.7.14; 13.17.22; *Tractatus in Joannem* 19.15; 47.12; *De Predestinatione Sanctorum* 24.67; *Enchiridion* 10.35; *Sermons* 130.3; 186.1; 293.7).

What is, perhaps, most significant about the question in the Synoptic text is that Jesus leaves it unanswered. The question itself is the last word in the episode, not because it is a rhetorical question, but because the answer eludes investigation. While it is perfectly legitimate to ask, "How is he his son?" neither Jesus nor his Church has ever attempted to answer this "how?" Efforts to do so, it seems to me, have always landed somewhere in the broad area of heresy.

How are the two natures in the Incarnation united in the single person of God's Word—How is he both son and Lord? At Chalcedon, it seems, the Fathers agreed together, "You know, darn it, we don't have the foggiest idea. What we can and must say, however, is that the Incarnation involved no confusion of the divine and human natures. Nor, on the other hand, was either nature changed. And we are further certain there was no division in this unity, nor any separation. That is just about the limit of what we can affirm."

And this is what Chalcedon finally determined in its four famous adverbs: *asynchytos, atreptos, adiairetos, achoristos*---"without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." This description of the mystery, we observe, is completely apophatic. Contrary to the assessment of some later historians of dogma, Chalcedon did not attempt to "throw light on the mystery of the Incarnation." It threw light, rather, on a couple of heresies.

And this, I submit, is the purpose of dogmatic definitions. They exist for the purpose of confounding heresies, not elucidating mysteries. Conciliar dogma throws a protective hedge about the Gospel, a hedge occasionally fortified by the addition of thorns---in the shape of anathemas, as Chalcedon did.

Jesus did not answer his own question "How, then, is he his son?" And Chalcedon knew better than to try.

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