

February 3, 2013

Sunday After the Lord's Presentation

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Prayer of the High Priest

Whereas in Luke's presentation of Jesus' prayer the Savior appears as the sacrificial victim, in John's presentation he is portrayed, rather, as the sacrificing priest. The relevant text is Jesus' lengthy prayer in John 17. Notwithstanding the subtlety of John's portrayal, Bible-readers have for centuries described the material in John 17 as Jesus' "high priestly prayer." In the following reflections I will argue that they are correct.

We should begin, I think, by attending to the structure of the prayer:

First, Jesus prays for himself: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You . . . And now, O Father, glorify me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was."

Second, and in more detail, Jesus prays for the Apostles who are with him, his immediate family, as it were, those whose feet he has now washed: "I pray for them. . . . Keep through Your name those whom You have given me. . . . I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. . . . Consecrate them in truth."

Third, Jesus prays for the whole People of God, those who "believe in me" through the testimony of the Apostles. Jesus' prayer for this larger group is likewise manifold; it includes the unity of the believers, the proclamation of the Gospel to the world, and the revelation of the divine glory. Jesus prays, "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in You . . . that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent me, and have loved them as You have loved me . . . that they may behold my glory which You have given me."

It is instructive to observe that the three-fold structure of this prayer of Jesus corresponds to the triple concern of the priest on Yom Kippur, as prescribed in Leviticus 16: First and second, the priest makes the sin offering (hahatta'th), "which is for himself, and to make atonement (kipper) for himself and for his household" (Leviticus 16:6, 11). Third, having sprinkled the blood of the victim

on the mercy seat (kapporet), the priest offers another victim, "which is for the people" (16:14-15).

Leviticus directs specific attention to this triple concern of Yom Kippur, during which the priest "makes atonement (kipper) [1] for himself, [2] for his household, and [3] for all the assembly of Israel" (16:17).

In John 17 the priestly quality of Jesus' prayer is also apparent in its references to consecration. Here the verb *hagiazō*, to "sanctify" or "consecrate," appears three times in immediate succession: "Consecrate them in truth. . . . And for their sakes I consecrate myself, that they themselves, likewise, may be consecrated in truth."

In the traditional Greek translation (Septuagint) of the Torah, the verb *hagiazō* (along with its nominal cognates) is frequently found in references to the consecration of the priests and of the appointments of the priestly ministry (for instance, twelve times in Exodus 29 and six times in Leviticus 22). The use of this same verb in Jesus' prayer summons to mind those priestly associations in the Torah. The verb's concentrated appearance in this prayer amply explains why Christians have long referred to it as "high priestly." This description manifests an intuition---as early as Cyril of Alexandria (cf. In Joannem 1.8)---that the Johannine Christ is especially Christ the Priest.

The faith of the first Christians included the perception that the priestly self-consecration of Jesus was an essential component of our Redemption. That is to say, they believed that Jesus knew himself to be the priest and that, as the priest, he offered himself in sacrifice in an intentional way.

Although there is no evidence that Christians used the noun "priest" in reference to Jesus until it appeared in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the idea itself was familiar enough for the Apostle Paul to write, "Christ loved us and handed himself over (*paredoken*) for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet aroma" (Ephesians 5:2). In this passage Paul deliberately employs the language of priestly ritual to elaborate on his earlier reference to "the Son of God, loving me and handing himself over (*paradontos*) for me" (Galatians 2:20).

©2013 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