

March 3, 2013

The Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Laying Down His Life

The theology of the Lord's Passion, as portrayed in the Fourth Gospel, is not exhausted by our considerations of Jesus—hitherto—Priest. He is also portrayed as the one who generously forfeits his life for the sake of those he loves. In John's Gospel this idea is thematic.

Thus, in the Last Supper discourse Jesus declares: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to lay down his life on behalf of (hyper) his friends. . . . No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends" (John 15:12-15).

Here Jesus takes up the affirmation contained in his Good Shepherd parable: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sake of (hyper) the sheep. . . . I give my life for (hyper) the sheep" (John 10:11, 15).

John has this affirmation in mind when he writes, "By this we know love, because he laid down his life for our sake (hyper hemon)" (1 John 3:16).

In respect to Jesus laying down his life, John narrates the ironic prophecy of Caiaphas the high priest. After the raising of Lazarus, we recall, the Sanhedrin expressed concern that "everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and will abolish both our place and nation."

In response to this concern Caiaphas declared: "You know nothing whatever, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the sake of (hyper) the people, and not that the whole nation should perish."

Whereas Caiaphas recommended the murder of Jesus as a political expedient, the Evangelist perceived that his cynical declaration was, in fact, freighted with the drama of prophecy: "Now he did not say this on his own, but, being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the sake of (hyper) the nation, and not for the sake of (hyper) that nation only, but also that he would gather together into one the scattered children of God" (John 11:47-52).

In these affirmations we recognize the root of the early Christian conviction that Christ died for us, on our behalf, for our sake—hyper hemon. Thus, the Apostle Paul summed up the work of the Atonement: “While we were yet powerless, Christ died, at the chosen time, for the sake of (hyper) the ungodly. Indeed, scarcely for (hyper) a righteous man will someone die, though on behalf of (hyper) a good man someone might even dare to die. But God demonstrates His love in our regard, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for our sake (hyper hemon) (Romans 5:6-8).

Although Christians subsumed this language, in due course, into the grammar of sacrifice, it was not (like Ephesians 5:2) originally sacrificial in a formal sense. That is to say, to give one’s life for someone else is not a sacrifice understood as a liturgical immolation or ritual gift. It is more proper to think of it, rather, as sacrificial in an extended and metaphorical sense. Even today we lengthen the imagery of sacrifice to cover anyone’s gift of his life for the sake of a person, a group, or a cause. For example, we speak this way all the time in reference to the heroism of those who defend and protect us.

It is true that hyper (followed by the genitive) can, in some contexts, mean “instead of,” “in place of,” but this hardly seems to be the case in the examples we are examining here; clearly Jesus did not die in our place. That is to say, we still must die.

We should further observe that the use of hyper in these New Testament texts refers to Jesus’ experience of dying. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, “we see Jesus, 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 (hyper) every person” (2:9).

It is Jesus’ death—not the Passion, the sufferings, in general—that is envisaged in these references. Surely, Jesus’ experience of dying was painful in the extreme, and, just as surely, that suffering, also, was endured on our behalf and for our sakes. Nonetheless, when Holy Scripture speaks of what Jesus did for us, the reference is invariably to his death. The other grievous afflictions associated with his death are descriptions of how he tasted death. They are theologically significant, not in themselves, but with respect to Jesus’ death. They were aspects of his death. The Enemy he met and defeated on the Cross was death.

It appears that the idea of dying for somebody, or laying down one's life on behalf of a cause or a nation, was fairly late in the thought of Judaism. When John wrote, "we also ought to lay down our lives for (hyper) the brethren" (1 John 3:16), he expressed a moral ideal that had only recently emerged among the Chosen People. Its presence in Hebraic ethos and culture is not obvious, in fact, until the time of Daniel and the Maccabees.

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