

March 17, 2013

Cheesefare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Purging the Heavenly Sanctuary

Jesus rose from the dead, not in order to return to the earth but in order to enter "into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24). His priesthood is heavenly; "if he were on earth, he would not be a priest" (8:4). His priestly service, commenced on Calvary, was perfected when, "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood he entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (9:12).

The Lord's Ascension, then, is essential to the work of the Atonement. According to a theme developed chiefly in the Epistle to the Hebrews, God united us to Himself—made us at one with Himself—not only by the Son's assumption of our humanity in the Incarnation, but also by this Son's bearing our humanity home to the Divine Presence. In Christ's Ascension, God eradicates every vestige of our alienation from Him.

This theme elicits four considerations:

First, the Lord's ascent on high is the counterpart to his descent into hell. Just as, in dying, "he went and preached to the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3:19), so, in his ascent into heaven, "he became the cause (aitios) of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:9). He met angelic spirits in both places: in hell the fallen spirits and in heaven "an innumerable company of angels" (12:22). Cosmology itself demanded this; an ontological postulate of his Lordship required that "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth" (Philippians 2:10).

Second, Jesus entered into heaven in order to cleanse and consecrate "the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands" (Hebrews 9:11), "the true tabernacle the Lord pitched and not man" (8:2). This hallowing of heaven, which corresponded to the harrowing of hell, was an essential part of the Atonement. Just as the earthly sanctuary was cleansed and consecrated

with the blood of sacrificial offerings, so it was necessary that heavenly sanctuary should be purified “with better sacrifices than these” (9:23).

It is a foundational teaching of Holy Scripture that man has no communion with God, even in heaven, except in and through the blood of the Lamb. His blood is the instrument of the expiation and purification of all things, including “heaven itself” (9:24). For even “the heavens are not pure in His sight” (Job 15:15).

Because Christ’s cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary—clearly affirmed in the Epistle to the Hebrews—is not, I believe, a theme much developed in later theology, a word of explanation may be in order: We may start by reflecting that sin—alienation from God—did not begin on earth but in heaven. Sin was found in heaven before it was found on earth. The rebellious demons instructed and encouraged men to rebel against God. Prior to Christ’s cleansing of it, the heavenly tabernacle was still infected with the vestiges of that demonic rebellion.

A particularly distressing aspect of that contamination was the ability of Satan to stand before the Almighty as man’s Accuser. But no more, because “now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, because the Accuser of our brethren, who indicted them day and night before our God, has been cast down” (Revelation 12:10).

Third, by the blood-purification of the heavenly tabernacle, the Accuser has been replaced by the Advocate (cf. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.17.3). In heaven he ever lives to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25). This theological thesis is not limited to the Epistle to the Hebrews. John, for instance, writes, “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he himself is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:1). And Paul, for his part, declares that Christ’s heavenly advocacy on our behalf is a component of Redemption, for he “died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Romans 8:34).

Fourth, by his ascent into heaven, Christ makes heavenly blessings available to us on earth (cf. Ephesians 4:8). In particular, Christ’s Ascension provides an “entrance” for us. We, too, have access to the Throne (Hebrews 4:16; 12:22-24). Even now, in and through his blood, there is “a better hope, by which we draw nigh to God” (Hebrews 7:19).

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