

April 28, 2013

Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Peter on the Atonement

When we consider the oral tradition that preceded the writing of the Gospels, it is essential to consider its personal quality; only a few individuals were able to speak to the ministry and teaching of Jesus with recognized authority: the Apostles whom he had chosen. The Evangelists, in their composition, did not draw on rootless sources and anonymous testimonies. The canonical collectors, the men who gathered these writings into an authoritative corpus, were certain that each of the Gospels rested on the personal witness of one of the Twelve. In Mark, for instance, they knew they were dealing with Peter.

This is the reason we should study Peter's theology of the Atonement in conjunction with our examination of Mark. For now, two texts will suffice:

Writing of the Passion of Christ, Saint Peter declared, "It is better to suffer for doing good—if God's will so determines—than for doing evil. For also Christ suffered once for sins, a just man for unjust people, in order that he might bring you to God, being slain in the flesh but enlivened in the Spirit . . ." (1 Peter 3:18). Several points in this compact text merit particular reflection:

First, Peter introduces this imagery for an exhortatory purpose; he is holding up Jesus as a moral example Christians are to follow. The immediate context discloses this purpose; in the preceding verses he tells his readers to be always ready to provide a "defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed" (3:15-16).

Second, Peter's allusions to Isaiah 53 in this place are unmistakable. The prophet had written: "The Lord handed him over for our sins (paredoken avton tais hamatiais hemon). . . . For the transgressions of my people he was led unto death"(Isaiah 53:6 & 8 LXX).

Third, in appealing to soteriological meaning of the Isaian text, Peter describes Jesus' own intention: "He suffered . . . in order . . ."—apethanen . . . hina."

That is to say, our access to God, according to Peter, was not simply the result of Jesus' suffering but its deliberate reason. The atonement was not only the objective purpose (telos) effected by Jesus suffering; it was also his subjective intention, his deliberate aim (skopos), in so suffering. The fulfillment of the Isaian prophecy was not only something Jesus did; it is something he had in mind to do.

This is a precious testimony, inasmuch as Peter was a witness to the thoughts and sentiments Jesus expressed during the period leading immediately up to his death, the timeframe indicated in the second half of Mark's Gospel. Peter heard each of the Lord's prophecies of the Passion.

Fourth, according to Peter the atoning work of Christ included, not only the removal of sins, but also a positive access to God. According to Peter, Jesus brings (prosagage) us to God.

With respect to the same Isaian prophecy, another passage in 1 Peter is more detailed and certainly more explicit: "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps, "who did not sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth"; who, when he was reviled, did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but committed himself to Him who judges righteously; who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by his wounding you were healed" (2:21-24).

Once again, certain observations are in order: First, Peter's intention is exhortatory; he appeals to the sufferings of Christ by way of providing a practical example to his readers how they are to follow in his steps. Peter's intention is conveyed in the immediately preceding verses: "For what sort of credit is there if you bear it patiently when you are beaten for your faults? If, however, you endure it when you do good and still suffer, this is pleasing to God. For to this you have been called, because also Christ suffered for you . . ." (2:20-21).

Second, the reference to Isaian prophecy is indicated, not only by a verbal similarity, but also by a direct quotation: "he did not sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth" (Isaiah 53:9 (XX)).

Third, Peter's direct quotation is surrounded with other echoes of Isaiah 53. For instance, his assertion, "by his wounding you were healed," is a near quotation of Isaiah 53:5, "by his wounding we have been healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

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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

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