

June 9, 2013

Sunday of the Man Born Blind

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Chosen Exiles

Just as the word describing Peter---"apostle"---has no article, the article is also missing in Peter's reference to those who received his first epistle. They are, literally, "chosen exiles of the Diaspora." The absence of the article, here too, makes the reference a theological description of Peter's audience. Moreover, an analysis of these three words—chosen, exiles, Diaspora—will also serve to introduce a major theme of First Peter: the Church.

Since the word, "church," is not found in the Petrine corpus, it may not be immediately obvious that this is a major theme. In fact, however, the theme of ecclesiology seems foremost in Peter's mind, beginning with the three words he uses to describe his audience at the beginning of the first epistle: "chosen exiles of the Diaspora." It is time to analyze those three words:

First, the recipients of this letter are "chosen," or "elect" (eklektoi), a term of long usage in the Bible, particularly in reference to Israel as the Lord's Chosen People. For instance, "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:6).

Peter's Christian readers are described as eklektoi in the sense that they represent and embody the historical extension of Israel, God's Chosen People. As such, they are "God's flock" (5:2). This is a familiar theme in the New Testament, of course. Just a few years before this epistle from Rome, the believers at Rome had received from St. Paul another letter, in which the Gentile Christians were portrayed as alien branches grafted onto the ancient olive stock of Israel (Romans 11:13-24).

It is important to observe that the modifier, "elect" or "chosen," is plural; it refers to the whole People of God, as it does throughout Holy Scripture. There is no suggestion here of some theory of individual predestination to salvation: indeed, the idea is alien to the Bible. Except when it refers to individual calls to ministry and service, the modifier "chosen" is normally plural and refers to God's People.

Who, in Peter's mind, are they? They are the very recipients of this letter: "But you are an elect generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special People, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; formerly you were not a people, but now the

People of God; you once had not obtained mercy, but now you have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Peter's text puts the reader in mind of a text of Paul: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:3-5).

Second, the recipients of this letter are "exiles" (parepidemoi). In the next chapter Peter uses the word again by way of moral exhortation: "I beg you as sojourners and exiles (paroikous kai parepidemous), abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (2:11). This is another expression with a long history in Holy Scripture. In reference to various biblical characters, as well as to Israel itself, the noun appears repeatedly in the Greek Old Testament, sometimes in conjunction with "sojourners" (paroikoi) (for instance Genesis 23:4; Psalms 38 [39]:13).

Likewise, another New Testament author joins this noun to "foreigners" (xenoi) to describe the Old Testament saints as "foreigners and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). When used of Christians, the expression indicates that they live in this world as exiled citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). An anonymous second-century Christian summarized the idea eloquently: "They live in their own countries, but only as sojourners (paroikoi). They participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners (xenoi). Every foreign place (xene) is their fatherland, but every fatherland is foreign (xene)" (Letter to Diognetus 5.5).

Third, the recipients of this letter pertain to the "Diaspora." In the Greek Old Testament, where this word is found twelve times, it invariably indicates the Jews who live outside of the Promised Land. St. Peter, however, already familiar with this sense of the expression, uses it in a more theological sense; it strengthens the spiritual meaning of "chosen exiles."

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