

March 23, 2014  
Sunday of the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings  
Paul and Jeremiah

The Apostle Paul speaks of his conversion graphically and with a certain flourish. It happened, he wrote, "when it pleased God, who appointed me (aphorisas me) from my mother's womb (ek koilias metros mou) and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach him among the nations (en tois ethnesin)" (Galatians 1:15-16).

This striking description is consistent with Paul's later self-description at the beginning of Romans: "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, called an apostle, appointed (aphorismenos) for the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1).

More particularly, however, Paul's self-description bears close comparison with the prophet Jeremiah's account of his own calling, especially as it appears in the Septuagint version the Apostle manifestly has in mind: "Before I fashioned you in the womb (en koiliai) / I knew you; / Before you came forth from your mother (ek metras) / I sanctified you; / I commissioned you as a prophet unto the nations (eis ethne)" (Jeremiah 1:5).

The literary connection between these vocation-stories in Jeremiah and Galatians has been recognized from the beginning. For example, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote in the second century, "Now, inasmuch as the Word of God fashions us in the womb, He says to Jeremiah, "Before I fashioned you in the womb, I knew you; and before you came forth from the womb, I sanctified you, and I commissioned you as a prophet unto the nations." And Paul, too, says in like manner, "when it pleased God, who appointed me from my mother's womb, that I might declare Him among the nations" (Adversus Haereses 5.15.3).

It is worth asking why, among so many vocation-narratives in the prophetic writings, Paul chose to cite that of Jeremiah? A correct and most obvious answer, surely, is the reference to Jeremiah's ministry "unto the nations." These "nations," ethne, are what other translations call the "Gentiles" (non-Jews).

This word, borrowed from the Greek version of the Jeremian text, directly touches on Paul's sense of vocation. He thought of himself as an *ethnon apostolos*, an "apostle of the nations" (Romans 11:13), with an *apostolen . . . eis ta ethne*, an "apostleship . . . to the nations" (Galatians 2:8).

One suspects, however, that Paul identified with Jeremiah for other reasons, as well, partly with respect to his experience of the Cross.

Interpreting that approaching destruction of Jerusalem was at the very substance of Jeremiah's ministry. The Lord was on the point of destroying the very institutions that He had for centuries cultivated and sustained, and in the heart of Jeremiah the city's looming downfall assumed metaphysical dimensions. It suggested to his mind both the overthrow of nature and the dissolution of history. Thus, it was Jeremiah's destiny to assume the impending tragedy of Israel into the fabric of his own heart, an experience that filled him with a sense of unutterable dread.

Like Jeremiah, who foresaw the coming destruction of the Temple, Paul sensed that he was living in apocalyptic times. Like Jeremiah's, Paul's soul was formed by his internal identification with the tragic history of his people. Israel, he perceived, had entered a very different era by reason of its recent rejection of the Messiah; things would never again be the same for the Chosen People.

Herein, too, lay Paul's self-identification with Jeremiah. This prophet, likewise, had suffered at the hand of his countrymen. They accused him (Jeremiah 37:14), conspired against him (18:18), seized him (26:8), sought his life (11:21), struck him and put him in stocks (20:2), imprisoned him (32:3), kidnapped him (chapters 42—43), and threw him in a deep pit where he nearly died from hunger (38:6–9).

The Acts of the Apostles, as well as his own letters, testifies to the ways Paul's experience of rejection and persecution corresponded to the life of Jeremiah. The latter's personal desolation, moreover, was intensified by a life of consecrated celibacy and asceticism as a prophetic sign of Jerusalem's approaching devastation (16:1–5). Paul, too, embraced that model, and for much the same reason (1 Corinthians 7:7; cf. 7:26).

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