

June 22, 2014

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

No treatment of the Passion of Christ is complete, I think---certainly it is not biblical---if it leaves out the wrath of God. One would need to be blind not to observe in the Bible---both Testaments---how often God is said to be angry at man's sins, or how frequently He is said to inflict punishment for those sins. And if it is true that the Lamb of God, by his death on the Cross, takes away the sins of the world, how is it possible to speak of his sacrificial death without relating it to the anger of God? Just for starts, the Psalms of the Passion incessantly speak of God's anger.

The subject is both broad and subtle, however, and needs a careful, critical examination.

By way of clearing the field, I should probably speak first of a widely held soteriological theory, called "Penal Substitutionary Satisfaction," which represents a line of interpretation in the Reformed Tradition of Protestantism. Neglecting variations in the theory, I think it is adequate to say that those who adhere to it hold some form of the following three points:

First, when the human race fell into sin, violence was done to the metaphysical structure of justice, and man incurred the anger of God. The violated structure of justice, in turn, required a punishment (poena) condign to the offense. (God's anger is universally recognized as a metaphor for the punitive function of justice.) God could not simply forgive the offense, because such forgiveness would be, itself, unjust; the exercise of justice requires . . . well, justice; that is to say,

there is no real justice without the component of retribution. The guilty had to be punished; there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. Such was the "curse" spoken of in Genesis 3 and Galatians 3.

Second, the divine wrath was concentrated on the crucified Christ; God's eternal Son assumed our human nature and willingly took on himself this punishment. This he did by way of offering himself as a sacrifice, fulfilling the intent of---and the prophecies contained in---the sacrifices of the Old Testament. In this self-sacrifice Christ was punished in place of all humanity. His punishment was substitutionary.

Third, by reason of Christ's sacrificial assumption of this punishment (poena), the divine wrath was completely placated; a sufficient and plenary satisfaction was made for the sins of the world. God forgives man's offenses, because the sacrifice of Christ has made full reparation for them. His penal satisfaction was plenary.

Although I am obliged to address these points, I believe that the theory itself seriously limits the terms necessary for a proper discussion of the Passion and the divine anger. Penal Substitutionary Satisfaction seems to me too narrow, uneven, and wobbly a basis for a sturdy treatment of how the Passion of Christ is related to the anger of God.

Right away, one is faced with two theological and exegetical problems:

First, the proponents of this theory appeal to the principle of justice. Well, then. to the principle of justice let us send them. What judge justly punishes one man for the sins of another? On the contrary, few ideas in Holy Scripture are clearer than this: God never punishes anyone for someone else's sins. However, then, the Passion of Christ is related to the anger of God---whatever it means to declare that Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree, or to affirm that by his stripes we are

healed---we cannot mean that God punished Jesus as a substitute for the rest of us.

Second, the proponents of this theory appeal to the category of sacrifice to interpret Christ's death on the Cross, and well they should, for the Bible tells us. If, however, our consideration of this category is to remain biblical, there is a significant problem. If we call upon the Bible---and, forsaking all others, adhere only to the Bible---the category of sacrifice provides no legitimate way to relate the event of the Cross to the anger of God. Simply and plainly put, Israel's sacrificial system and theology---distinguished in this respect from paganism---never speaks of the divine anger. Sometimes the Bible speaks of blood sacrifice; sometimes the Bible speaks of God's anger. But never together. What justifies our putting together two ideas that God was careful to put asunder?

Here is the problem: When the Israelites provoke the Lord's wrath, He punishes them, even by death. When they repent and turn to them, God forgives them. But God never tells Moses, 'Look, I am fed up with these people. Here is what you should do: Let me take out My vengeance on some sheep or goat, so I won't be angry with Israel any more.' Nowhere in Israel's sacrificial theology is an immolated victim the concentrated object of the divine anger. And if God was not angry with the Passover lamb---if the sin offering of Yom Kippur was not the object of his wrath---how can we think that He bore an avenging grudge against His Son?

By itself, then, the biblical category of sacrifice provides no sustaining link between the anger of God and the Passion of Christ.

Yet, they are most certainly related, because the Bible emphatically relates them. How should this be expressed? Following the lead of the

Council of Chalcedon, I propose to examine two complementary and mutually necessary approaches to the subject.

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