

March 15, 2015
Third Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
Christ's Pre-existence

Several decades ago, when our family was still Episcopalian, a new parishioner remarked that I seemed to have a "high Christology." Responding to my comment that I had no idea what he was talking about, he explained that a high Christology believes in Jesus' pre-existence as God's Son. A "low Christology," on the other hand, believes that the human being Jesus was *adopted* as God's Son, whether at his Baptism, or his Resurrection, or whatever. "Christians," I asked, "who don't believe Jesus is God's eternal Son? How can that be?"

As I have thought about this matter over the years, one idea has become perfectly clear: The early Christians knew nothing about a "low" Christology; even the Arians believed in a pre-existence of Christ!

Our earliest New Testament sources testify to a firm conviction on the pre-existence of God's Son. Take, for instance, the fragment of the pre-Pauline hymn preserved in Philippians 2:6-8. It speaks of "Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be seized." In other words, Christ was divine before he *became* human; he did not start out as a human being whom God adopted as His Son. This (exceedingly *high*) Christology is what Paul learned when he joined the Church.

Two verbs, in particular, testify to this primitive conviction of the Church: First, "send"; God *sent* His Son. Second, "come"; the Son *came* into the world.

First, when Paul says that God *sent* His Son, the context of this expression indicates something quite different from His *sending* of the Prophets. In the reference to God "sending (*pempsas*) His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3), the participle refers to the Son's new state, his entrance into history. That is to say, the Son existed prior to his Enfleshment as a human being.

The same thesis is affirmed in Galatians 4:4. There we are told, not simply that God *sent* His Son, but that “God *sent forth* His Son”—*exsapesteilen*. (Cf. Acts 13:16). The verb’s prefix implies the Son’s pre-existence.

For Paul Christ’s pre-existence is presumed in the very concept of the Incarnation; he speaks of the Son in two “states.” Thus, he tells the Corinthians that Christ, “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Virtually all interpreters of this text recognize its reliance on the hymnic theology preserved in Philippians: God’s eternal Son *emptied* himself, humbled himself, and assumed our low estate.

Second, there is the verb, “come,” which appears in various dominical sayings of self-reference; Jesus speaks of himself as someone who has “come” into the world. Indeed, it is hard to explain why Paul and the pre-Pauline Church thought of Jesus as “sent” unless we take at face-value Jesus’ assertions that he had “come.”

In the gospels these dominical logia appear in two forms: In the tradition represented in the Synoptic Gospels the subject is the “Son of Man”; in the Fourth Gospel the subject is “I.”

Thus, according to the Synoptics, Jesus proclaimed that the Son of Man *came* to call sinners, not the righteous (Mark 2:17). He *came* to seek and save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). He *came* to give his life as a ransom for the many (Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:28). In these saying Jesus manifests a self-consciousness of being transcendent to anything merely human.

These declarations demonstrate a remarkably “high” Christology in the Synoptics. I readily agree with Johannes Schneider’s assessment, more than a half-century ago, that they “derive from the Messianic self-awareness of Jesus and are to be explained thereby.”

In the Fourth Gospel the use of “have come” in the dominical logia is an explicit self-attestation, expressed in the first person singular. Thus, Jesus says, “*I came forth (exselthon)* from God” (8:42), “*I have come* in my Father’s name” (5:43), “I know where *I came* from” (8:14), “*I have come* that they may have life” (10:10), “*I have come* as a light into the world” (12:46), and “For judgment *I have come* into this world” (9:39).

Such logia are consistent with the Baptist's declaration that God's Son, "who *comes* after me . . . *was* before me"(1:15). The Son already existed before he *came*.

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