

March 22, 2015
Sunday of the Ladder

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings Primitive Creedal Form

St Paul, as he begins to write the Epistle to the Romans, cites an early creedal formula by way of introducing several of the themes he has in mind to treat. He speaks of “the Gospel of God” (and here I appeal to an elaborate translation recently suggested by Dr. Matthew W. Bates) “concerning his Son, who as it pertains to the flesh came into existence by means of the seed of David; who as it pertains to the Spirit of Holiness was appointed Son-of-God-in-power by means of the resurrection from among the dead ones—Jesus Christ our Lord” Romans 1:3-4).

Since this “potted creed” (Archibald M. Hunter’s description of it more than fifty years ago) does not fit Paul’s usual vocabulary, it is worth inquiring why he cites it at the beginning of his most complex and elaborate epistle. Three reasons suggest themselves:

First, in this epistle Paul is about to elaborate ideas that might sound *new* to some believers, especially Christians who—like those at Rome—had not been catechized by the Apostle himself. For such believers his citation of this recognized creedal form serves as an initial encouragement to hear the rest of his epistle with sympathy and consent. He makes to make it perfectly clear, from the start, that what he is about to write is rooted in what all believers recognize as “the Gospel of God,” the faith once delivered to the saints. If this motive seems far-fetched, one should recall how sensitive Paul could be when his authority as an apostle was called into question (cf. for instance, Galatians 1:1).

Second, later in Romans Paul will devote critical attention to the destiny of the Jewish People. Through chapters 9 to 11, in particular, he will develop a dialectical vision of Salvation History, in which Israel’s rejection of the Messiah serves to advance—not impede—the power of divine grace. In addition, Paul will argue, this same historical dialectic promises, in due course, Israel’s return to its proper inheritance in the Kingdom.

To prepare for his elaboration of this subject in Romans, Paul cites this short creedal formula, which affirms that God’s Son assumed flesh “of the

seed of David.” This affirmation, which implicitly excludes—for all times—any detachment of the faith from the historical role of Israel, is a rudimentary component of the Gospel itself. In the mind of Paul it is an *essential* feature of the “Gospel of God” that “He promised [it] before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2). That is to say, Israel and the Gospel are not detachable from one another.

Third, later in Romans Paul will appeal to the enfleshing of the Son as the conversion point where the intervention of grace displaces the Torah as the governing force in human experience: “For what was impossible to the Law because it was weak through the flesh (*dia tes sarkos*)—God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (*en homoiomati sarkos hamartias*) on account of sin, condemned sin in the flesh (*ten hamartian en tei sarki*)” (Romans 8:3).

This affirmation respecting the Son’s assumption of “the likeness of sinful flesh” appears as the climax to the Apostle’s account of the experience of “sinful flesh”: “I am fleshly (*sarknos*), sold under sin (*hypo ten hamartian*). . . . I know that in me—that is, in my flesh (*en tei sarki mou*)—no good dwells. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:14, 18, 24)

The “sinful flesh” (*sarxs hamartias*) of which Paul writes in Romans 8:2—the flesh assumed by God’s Son—is the same flesh of which Paul complains all through the previous chapter. According to Saint Paul, that is to say, the flesh assumed by the Son of God was identical to our own. Becoming like us (*en homoiomati*), He took on “the flesh of sin”—*sarxs hamartias*. In view of the New Testament’s insistence that Christ was sinless—and that death, consequently, had no hold on him—Paul’s description of the Incarnation in Romans 8 seems unusually bold. It is valuable for its clear assertion that the Son, in the Incarnation, assumed our humanity in its *fallen* state.

Already, however, at the very beginning of the epistle, Paul had cited an ancient creedal formula—“who as it pertains to the flesh came into existence by means of the seed of David”—by way of preparing for the doctrinal development he was to present several chapters later.

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