February 2, 2003
The Feast of the Lord's Presentation

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The doctrine of divine providence is asserted in the biblical thesis that "all things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). This "working together" of historical events under divine governance for particular and inter-related purposes is a mystery, of course, but a mystery in two senses.

First, divine providence is a mystery in the sense that it is humanly inscrutable, exceeding even the furthest reaches of our thought, and is known only by faith. That is to say, it pertains to divine revelation. It is not the general, natural *pronoia* of the Stoics, but a special and personal providence revealed by God's particular and mysterious interventions in the actual structure of history. For this reason Holy Scripture never attempts to explain it. Although the Bible affirms divine providence, it teaches no theory of the matter.

Second, divine providence is also a mystery in the sense that human beings are initiated into it. It is rendered accessible, that is, to human revelatory experience of it, the discernment of which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is particular and personal, sensed by the heart through the intelligible structure of events, coherent in their relationship. For this reason Holy Scripture not only affirms divine providence, but also portrays the mystery of it through narratives about events.

The Old Testament's story of Joseph is perhaps the most elaborate example of such a narrative. We do not discern how, in the Joseph story, "all things work together for good to those who love God," but the narrative enables us to perceive it intuitively, buried deep in the events of Joseph's life and conferring coherence on that life. At the end of the story we are able to say, with Joseph, "So it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:8).

In some cases, we can sense God's providential purpose in a biblical story by the insinuated dynamics of the story itself, without our attention being drawn to it by any explicit statement. Examples of this are found in the Book of Ruth and,

with far greater subtlety, the Book of Esther. In the latter story, in fact, God's intrusive activity in the events is so subtle that He is not even mentioned!

In other instances the Bible conveys the providential nature of a story by the direct insertion of it through the voice of the narrator. Through such an insertion, the story takes on an entirely different flavor, being transfigured, so to speak, from secular to sacred. For instance, the tale of David's escape from Saul at Hachilah (1 Samuel 26) is transformed into an account of divine providence by the plain statement that "they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen on them" (26:12). Similarly the biblical narrator says, in the context of Absalom's revolt, that "the Lord had proposed to defeat the good advice of Ahitophel to the intent that the Lord might bring disaster on Absalom" (2 Samuel 17:14).

Another literary method of conveying God's providential purpose in a biblical story is to place the affirmation of it in the mouth of one of the characters. As we have seen, this is the method followed in the Joseph story, in the scene where he reveals himself to his brothers (Genesis 45:5-7; 50:15-20).

Another and very fetching example of this literary device is found in Genesis 24, which describes the journey of Abraham's servant to Mesopotamia in order to find a suitable bride for Isaac (namely, Rebekah). In this exquisitely crafted account of God's historical intervention in response to prayer, two features should especially be noted.

First, the story is told twice, initially by the narrator (24:1-26) and then a second time by a character within in the narrative, namely the servant (24:34-48). This deliberate doubling of the story, which obliges the reader to think about its implications a second time, also serves the purpose of placing the theme of divine providence more completely within the fabric of the tale. In the first telling, the reader is struck by how quickly the servant's prayer is heard - "And it happened, before he had finished speaking" (24:15). This promptness of God's response is emphasized in the second telling - "before I had finished speaking in my heart" (24:45). God is encountered in the servant's experience of the event that comes crashing in, as it were, on his prayer.

Second, the doubling of the narrative is not artificial. It is

essential, rather, to the motive of Rebekah and her family in their decision that she should accompany the servant back to Abraham's home and become the wife of Isaac. That is to say, the characters themselves are made aware that God has spoken through the narrated events. They perceive God's providence: "The thing (dabar) comes from the Lord; we cannot speak (dabber) to you good or bad. Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be your master's son's wife, as the Lord has spoken (dibber)" (24:50-51). The event itself, the "thing," was a "word" from God, a *dabar*. That is to say, given the servant's testimony, it was clear that all things had worked together "for good to those who love God."

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