

June 4, 2006

The Sunday after the Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

A common complaint against the proclamation of our Lord's Resurrection is the claim that this story is only a variant of the ancient fertility myths about dying and rising gods. According to this objection, the risen Christ is just a Galilean version of Osiris, as it were.

It is convenient to this argument, of course, that both Jesus and Osiris rose again in the spring, and their celebrations make endless references to vernal themes like renewal and rebirth; they are reasonably regarded, therefore, as variations of a common and nearly universal motif. Of course, usually those that make this point also mean to imply that Jesus is to be taken no more seriously than Osiris.

This argument is very far off the mark. In fact, the Paschal Mystery is not about the death and resurrection of a god. The Church proclaims the Resurrection of Jesus as the Resurrection of a dead *man*. According to the Christian faith, it is as a *human being* that Jesus was raised from the dead. He arose in His humanity, just as He died in His humanity. It is a human being, then, who is transformed and glorified by the Resurrection.

Consequently, the first time the world heard the proclamation of the Resurrection, no mention was made of the pre-existing divinity of the One who rose. St. Peter did not say, "Well, He was God, after all, and there was no way to keep Him down." On the contrary, he proclaimed, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made *this Jesus*, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

With respect to the dying and rising of pagan divinities no one ever announced, "of which we are all witnesses" (2:32). Strictly speaking, no one ever testified to the death and rising of some historical character named Osiris, and no one was ever invited to believe in Osiris. And it is very certain that no one ever laid down his life for preaching about Osiris.

In contrast, the Resurrection of Jesus was proclaimed as an historical fact, which involved a real man, a person recently deceased, someone whom everyone knew to have died. "This Jesus" was the One who rose.

The difference between these two cases is important, not only as a point of apologetics, but also as a concern of theology. In the man Jesus the human race commenced its journey through death to life. In the "faith of Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:22,26), "the author and finisher of faith," humanity passed from the power of death to eternal life. It was *this Jesus* "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

As "forerunner" (*prodromos*), Jesus became our high priest and mediator (6:20; 9:15; 12:24). Opening the way for us, He was the first to pass through every stage of human existence, including the stage of death resultant from the fall of Adam, and to attain mankind's new and definitive stage, the Resurrection. Rising from the dead He became the true and efficacious Head of the human race.

This doctrine is what Christian theology calls humanity's *anakephalaiosis*, or "re-Heading" (in Latin, *recapitulatio*). This term means that God's eternal Son, who became man, took unto Himself the fallen race of men, in order to re-create all humanity through His own humanity. Jesus Christ did this by passing through every stage of human experience and development--the First to do so--restoring to union with God what had perished in Adam.

An early expression of this theology comes from St. Irenaeus, a second century bishop of Lyons, who wrote of God's Word, "when He became incarnate and was made man, He re-headed in Himself (*in Seipso recapitulavit*) the long line of human beings, providing us with salvation in a brief, comprehensive manner, so that what we had lost in Adam we might recover in Christ Jesus--that is, our being in the image and likeness of God" (*Against the Heresies* 3.18.1).

In His assumption of our humanity, God's Word took to Himself, not only our nature, but also that personal experience of history which is proper to human beings. He sanctified our personal histories by gaining a human, first-hand, personal familiarity with life and death,

adding thereto the utterly new experience of eternal life gaining victory over death. His Resurrection was of the essence of man's redemption, His consecration of human experience from within.

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