January 1, 2012
The Circumcision of our Lord

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When Paul answered the skeptics at Corinth---those so-called Christians who denied the Resurrection---he became a bit agitated at one point. As he answered this denial, his language became unusually harsh. "Fool!" he said (*aphron*---1 Corinthians 15:36).

It is significant, I believe, that the noun here is in the singular, not the plural. If Paul intended simply to address the Corinthian skeptics, we would expect him to write, "Fools!" Let me suggest the reason he doesn't.

First, I believe Paul would not have felt comfortable addressing fellow Christians with a term of opprobrium. After all, Jesus had warned against this very thing (Matthew 5:22). Paul probably came closest to doing it when he reproached the Galatians: "Oh thoughtless Galatians"---*O anoetoi Galatai* (Galatians 3:1).

Second, at the point when Paul used the word "fool" in 1 Corinthians, he had already answered the skepticism of those Corinthians who denied the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Paul's mind had moved on.

Third, the expression "fool" was addressed, nor directly to the Corinthians, but to a hypothetical interlocutor: "But *someone* will say." Paul did not accuse the Corinthians of asking, ""How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" The person posing this question was imaginary; he was a conjectural "someone" (*tis*) Paul introduced as part of his argument.

The Greeks referred to this form of argument as a *diatribe*; literally a "wearing away," in the sense of a pastime. The word was often used of arguments based on hypothetical considerations. At this point, Paul was going beyond the mere unbelief of the Corinthian skeptics. He was pushing the question of the resurrection in a new direction, for the purpose of clarifying it.

The hypothetical skeptic, who pretended to dismiss the resurrection by asking what sort of body the dead rise in, was a fool, said Paul, because he contradicted the sovereign power of the Creator: "God gives a body as He pleases" (15:38). To deny God's ability to raise the dead was to affirm that death lies beyond the reach of God's power. This was an irrational, or foolish, claim.

Jesus, we recall, argued the same case when the Sadducees questioned him about the woman who had been married seven times. They, too, had raised a hypothetical objection: "Now there were seven brothers. . . . Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as

wife" (Mark 12:18-23). In answering the Sadducees, Jesus put his finger on the lack of logic in their denial. It was based in part, he said, on their unfamiliarity with "the power of God" (12:24; cf. Acts 23:7).

The sovereign power of God over death also served the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. When he wrote of Abraham's resolve---in obedience---to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham took this step of faith, he said, "considering that God is able to raise from the dead"---*ek nekron egeirein dynatos ho Theos* (Hebrews 11:19).

We find the same presumption in all three of these sources: If there is an almighty God, then there can be no *a priori* argument against the resurrection.

For Paul, this power of the Creator was manifest in the great variety of bodies He had already brought into being (1 Corinthians 15:39-41). The God who could bring a living plant from a puny seed---a seed which did not even slightly resemble the plant---will certainly not be taxed to transform a mortal body into a body filled with glory (15:37).

Paul elaborated this agricultural illustration, in which the dead body, "sown" in the earth, represented the seed from which will spring the harvest of immortality. The dead body and the resurrected body are numerically the same, but what a difference: "What is sown in corruption, is raised in incorruption. Sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. Sown in weakness, it is raised in power. Sown a psychic body (*soma psychikon*), it is raised a spiritual body (*soma pnevmatikon*)" (15:42-44).

To me it seems likely that Paul derived and extended this agricultural analogy from a metaphor in the treasury of the apostolic preaching. It preserved a parable of Jesus: "Amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24).

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