

August 17, 2003

Sunday After the Dormition of Our Lady

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Perhaps among the least appreciated, and seldom thought on, descriptions of Jesus our Lord is the one given by John the Baptist: "His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor; and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12).

Threshing is a violent activity, which consists in pounding the harvested grain repeatedly on a stone floor with a shovel or a flail, in order to separate it from the husks which enclose it. The discarded husks are called chaff. When this beating of the grain has been done, the thresher uses his shovel to throw it into the air, so that the wind will carry away the light and useless chaff, leaving the heavier kernels to fall once more to the threshing floor. This latter action is called winnowing.

Yes, threshing and winnowing are violent activities; they are likewise, if one may say so, very judgmental activities. Threshing and winnowing are emphatic, even ferocious ways of asserting "this, and not that." The thresher addresses the grain and the chaff and makes an aggressive distinction, as it were: "You stay put, but you get out of here." The separation of the two things is truly final. The grain and the chaff grew up together, but they will never be together again.

This definitive separation of wheat and chaff, which means the final acceptance and rejection of human decisions, is essential to the Gospel itself, because it affirms the everlasting significance of those decisions made in the course of time. Consequently, this biblical threshing stands directly at variance with those religious philosophies constructed on "the myth of the eternal return," in which all human decisions rendered in the course of history are "subject to further review," so to speak, and ultimate correction in an afterlife, in order to achieve a universal reconciliation. This latter heresy was appropriately condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553.

The biblical teaching about God's judgmental threshing, then, is asserted as though to answer the question contained in the provocative title of a book by a well known theologian of the

twentieth century, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* (*Allversöhnung?*). No, we do not dare to hope for such a thing. It is a delirious fantasy, neither a proper object of Christian hope, nor a proper subject for Christian speculation. In fact, St John of Mount Sinai warns us of the grave spiritual danger of even entertaining such a thought (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 5, "On Repentance"). If wheat and chaff are ultimately the same thing, then human choice is a mirage, human history only a theatrical production, and the death and resurrection of Christ ultimately meaningless. For this reason, Jesus as Savior must not be disconnected from Jesus as Thresher.

Just where in the gospels, however, do we detect Jesus acting as Thresher? In answering that question, most readers of the Bible would probably refer to our Lord's driving the money changers from the temple, and they would surely be correct in that reference. When Jesus drove the money changers from the temple, an event recorded in all four canonical gospels, it was the most eschatological of actions. Jesus thereby affirmed that the temple really is a precinct separated from an "outside," where are found "dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters and whoever loves and practices a lie" (Revelation 22:15). Thus, the story of Jesus purging the temple ends in enmity, not in a peaceful resolution. Similarly, the Bible's final book does not portray an afterlife of universal reconciliation, but an everlasting separation of wheat and chaff.

Even that earthly temple purged by Jesus was constructed on a threshing floor (2 Chronicles 3:1), Arauna's ancient rock where David's soul, for his final sin, was flailed by the angel of judgment (2 Samuel 24:18-25). Indeed, the place of man's worship, where he meets God and places himself under the divine gaze, is ever the hard surface of his purging. Prayer itself is a pounding of the soul, that the wheat may be beaten free of the chaff. Hence, in this world the true temple is necessarily constructed on the threshing floor. There, before the face of God, the heart is afflicted in repentance, the contrite and broken heart that God will not despise; indeed, this very breaking of the heart is the sacrifice that God requires (Psalms 51[50]:17). Such is the authentic worship of God in the soul's true temple, the prayer of repentant sinners who never cease to beat their breasts and plead for the divine mercy (Luke 18:13; 23:48).

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php