

March 14, 2004

Sunday of the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Everything that the Son of God did—His assumption of our flesh, His suffering and death, and His resurrection from the grave—all of it was "for the sake of us men and for our salvation." That entire event in human history, the event called Jesus Christ, was redemptive.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews the whole of this event is considered in terms of priesthood and mediation. Indeed, this emphasis is one of the distinctive characteristics of that book.

I do not mean, by this, that the mediating priesthood of Jesus is elsewhere unknown in the New Testament. In truth, St. Paul too speaks of the "one Mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:5), and he describes our Lord's suffering and death in terms of priesthood: "Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Ephesians 5:2).

It is true, nonetheless, that nowhere else in the New Testament do we find greater specific attention devoted to the mediating priesthood of Jesus than in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Not only does this book twice call Jesus "the Mediator of the new covenant" (9:15; 12:24), but this identification forms the very crux and core of the book. In addition, Hebrews is the only source in the New Testament that uses the words "priest" and "priesthood" with reference to Jesus.

It is instructive to employ the triadic outline of traditional, creedal soteriology (Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection) as an interpretive key to the priesthood and mediation of Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

First, Hebrews places the Incarnation at the root of our Lord's mediating priesthood. Following the principle that a biblical priest is "taken from among men" (5:1), the author

goes to some length to demonstrate Christ's identification with our human nature as the foundation of His mediating priesthood. Identifying the "man" of Psalm 2 as Jesus, he argues that Christ's assumption of our humanity was integral to His priesthood: "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he Himself likewise shared in the same" (2:14). Indeed, "in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in the things that pertain to God (*ta pros ton Theon*), to expiate (*hilaskesthai*) the sins of the people" (2:17).

Later on, such affirmations were of great moment to the Nicene Fathers. Commenting on this and other texts, Athanasius of Alexandria wrote of Jesus as our High Priest, "who leads forward and offers to the Father those who in faith approach Him, redeeming all and, for the sake of all, expiating the things that pertain to God (*hilaskomenos ta pros ton Theon*)" (*Contra Arianos* 2.7).

Second, with respect to the Lord's Passion, the Epistle to the Hebrews affirms that Jesus, "for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame" (12:2). He assumed our mortal state, in fact, "that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" (2:9), "that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (2:14). His very death was redemptive, in that He bore our sins on the cross: "Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many" (9:28). He obtained the redemption of our transgressions "by means of death" (9:15).

The very shedding of Christ's blood was essential to this redemption, inasmuch as "without shedding of blood there is no remission" (9:22). This new covenant, of which Jesus is the Mediator, is a covenant in blood, fulfilling the prophetic sacrifices of the Old Testament (9:1-10:22).

Third, regarding the soteriology of the Lord's resurrection, Hebrews speaks of "the God of peace, who brought again from the dead that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant" (13:20). Jesus' resurrection and entrance into the heavenly sanctuary were not afterthoughts, inessential to our redemption; they pertain to His mediating priesthood itself, which carries a heavenly, everlasting character. Indeed, "if He were on earth, He would not be a

priest" (8:4). Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is, then, completed in heaven, where "with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place, obtaining (*hevrámenos*) eternal redemption for us" (9:12).

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