

March 21, 2004

Sunday of St. John Climacus

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the entire life of Jesus Christ on earth, along with His descent into the nether world and His entrance into the heavenly sanctuary, pertained to our redemption, very early it became the custom of the Christian Church to speak most especially of His passion and death in respect to this redemption. The whole Christian Gospel was condensed in the expression, "the word of the Cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Thus, when Paul came to preach the Gospel to the Corinthians, he told them, "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). "God forbid," he said, "that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). In Paul's preaching the message of the Cross was placed in the middle and up front. He addressed his hearers as those "before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified" (Galatians 3:1).

Inasmuch as man's redemption was effected by the entire "event" of Jesus Christ, why all this emphasis on the cross, which symbolizes the humiliation, the sufferings, and the death of Jesus? Why not say, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him risen"? That would have corresponded to the truth, would it not? Why not call the Gospel "the word of the Resurrection"? That would certainly be an accurate account of the matter. Why, then, did Paul so emphasize the most horrible, least attractive aspect of our redemption—namely, the cross (Romans 6:6; 1 Corinthians 1:17; Galatians 5:11; 6:12,20; Ephesians 2:16; Philippians 2:8; 3:18; Colossians 1:20; 2:14)? Why did he choose to lay so much accent on the shedding of Christ's blood (Romans 3:25; 5:9; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13; Colossians 1:14,20)?

The reason for this emphasis is not difficult to discern. The sufferings and death of Jesus were—if the expression be allowed—the *hard* part. These constituted the costly elements of our redemption, that arduous expense of which Paul twice

said to the Corinthians, "you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23).

This is why the Apostle Peter wrote of our redemption by "the *precious* blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:19). Peter's adjective here, *timios*, means "costly." Again, according to John, Jesus redeemed us to God by His blood (Revelation 5:9), washed us from our sins in His blood (Revelation 1:5; 7:14; 12:11). Jesus' blood was, in short, the price for our redemption.

Although Christians have always known that Jesus was "raised for our justification," their warmer sentiments have traditionally been directed, rather, to the fact that He "was delivered up for our offenses" (Romans 4:25). From the very beginning, that is to say, they have been disposed to dwell in imagination, distress, and deep empathy on the thought of what Jesus endured on their behalf. Poignant and sensitive thought on the Lord's sufferings has always been an important part of inherited Christian piety. The sacred wounds on His very flesh have ever been treasured in the Christian heart, because He "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sin, might live for righteousness-by whose stripes you were healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Devout believers, starting with the authors of the bible, have ever felt this way. To limit ourselves, for now, to just one example of this piety, let us recall an early reaction of Christians to the public reading of the biblical prophecies of the Lord's Passion and the fulfillment of those prophecies in the Gospel accounts. This reaction was described by the nun Egeria, who recorded her experience of the Good Friday services in Jerusalem in the late fourth century. It is worth citing at some length:

"The entire time from the sixth to the ninth hour is occupied by public readings. They all concern the things that Jesus suffered; first they have the psalms on this theme, then the Apostolic Epistles and Acts which deal with it, and finally the passages from the Gospels. In this way they read the prophecies about what the Lord was to suffer, and then the Gospels about what He did suffer. Thus do they continue the readings and hymns from the sixth to the ninth hour, showing to all the people by the witness of the Gospels and the writings of the Apostles that the Lord actually suffered

everything the prophets had foretold. They teach the people, then, for these three hours, that nothing which took place had not been foretold, and all that was foretold was completely fulfilled. Dispersed among these readings are prayers, all fitting to the day. It is impressive to see the way all the people are moved by these readings, and how they mourn. You could hardly believe how every single one of them weeps during those three hours, old and young together, because of the way the Lord suffered for us" (*The Travels of Egeria* 37.5-7).

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