

April 18, 2004

St. Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I have earlier suggested that the message of salvation, as preserved in the New Testament, is usefully considered under three headings: the Gospel as addressed to the outsider and directed toward conversion, the Gospel as addressed to the insider and directed toward holiness, and the Gospel as pertaining to the life of eternal glory yet to come. This threefold consideration of the Gospel is especially helpful, I think, in the interpretation of the Epistle to the Romans.

In Romans this triadic division is obvious if we attend to Paul's use of verbal tenses in that epistle. An example is found in Romans 5:1-2: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (ESV). Here are all three tenses of the Gospel: past justification, present peace, future glory.

A few verses later Paul places the "now" of the Christian life between a past event and a future event: "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (5:10 ESV). Here we have a "now" set between justification and reconciliation in the past and salvation in the future.

These combinations of "have been, are, and shall be" correspond to what I have called the triadic proclamation of the Gospel. This triadic structure of the Gospel is indicated elsewhere: "Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed" (13:11) Here Paul describes the Christian life as standing between two events, our justification through faith and our salvation yet to come.

In examining each of these three stages of the Gospel in detail, we may start with the Gospel as a proclamation addressed to those still outside of Christ, outside of the Church. To these the Gospel is addressed as the invitation of divine grace, the offer of justification in Christ.

Paul develops this theme early in Romans, treating the failure of the Gentiles in chapter one and that of the Jews in chapter two, concluding of both groups that "they are all under sin" (3:9). Again, "All have sinned" (3:23). And because all have sinned, "there is no difference" between Jew and Gentile with respect to the need for redemption. All must be brought to conversion: "God's kindness leads you to repentance" (2:4).

With repentance comes Baptism, and with Baptism begins the second stage of the Gospel, the new life of divine grace and holiness: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4 ESV).

Baptism introduces the believer into the life of communion with Christ in His death and resurrection: "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. . . . Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him" (6:5,6,8).

In Romans the third stage of the Gospel, the future yet to come is normally called "salvation" and has particular reference to the resurrection of the body at the return of Christ. It will be in the resurrection of the body that the realm of death, inaugurated at Adam's sin, will finally be defeated. This is the "eternal life to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and incorruptibility" (2:7).

The final object of the Christian hope, for Paul, is what he calls "the redemption of our body" (8:23). Our very bodies will rise from the dead because they are, already, the temples

of the Holy Spirit: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (8:11).

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