

January 1, 2006

The Circumcision of our Lord

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I want to extend our consideration of a Christian study of the Chronicler by suggesting that there is more than one legitimate approach to the Sacred Text. Christian history itself testifies to this exegetical variety, in which the rich meaning of Holy Scripture is never reducible to just one framework nor to single formula. The Church has always insisted that the Bible is open to more than one approach, as long as each interpreter stays within, and takes his guidance from, the Rule of Faith (as explained, for example, by St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* 15.26).

We can start, for instance, by mentioning the standard four-fold outline formulated by Saint John Cassian in the early fifth century (*Conferences* 14.8).

This traditional outline speaks first of the literal or historical sense of the text, the meaning originally intended by the biblical writer himself. As applied to a Christian reading of Chronicles, the pursuit of this sense will endeavor to read the Sacred Text through the author's manifest theological and historical concerns and within the boundaries of the work's historical context. A great deal of the present commentary is devoted to this pursuit.

According to Cassian's outline, however, this literal sense of the Bible is transformed by its doctrinal significance discerned in the light of Christ. This is the deeper meaning of Holy Scripture indicated by the risen Lord, who "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

Following the lead of St. Paul, Sacred Tradition calls this meaning the Bible's allegorical sense (*allegoroumena*--Galatians 4:24), the newer, more complete significance, the *sensus plenior* evoked from the Sacred Page through its fulfillment in the Mystery of Christ. Reading Chronicles according to this sense, the figure of David, for example, is perceived to be a *type* of Christ, who fulfills in a special, definitive way what that Old Testament prophet and king accomplished by way of allegory. Namely, Christ provides for God's People the true worship, the true priesthood, the true Temple--all the things that David, through shadows and figures, provided in his own time.

The third sense in Cassian's traditional outline is the Bible's tropological or moral sense, its existential, practical, and concrete application to the life of the believing reader. We perceive this sense of the Old Testament in St. Paul's applications of the Sacred Text to the Christian's moral life, as when he wrote of the ancient Israelites in the desert, "all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). In addition to negative examples, such as the one just cited by Paul, the New Testament offers many positive Old Testament models, such as Elijah (James 5:17) and Rahab (Hebrews 11:31).

The work of the Chronicler, approached in this tropological sense, is full of myriad moral examples, both positive and negative, applicable to the life of the Gospel. Thus, the Christian reader is inspired to emulate such models as the foresight of David, the integrity of Jotham, the loyalty of Jehoiada, the courage of Micaiah, and so on, while cautiously eschewing the folly of Rehoboam, the infidelity of Jehoram, the cruelty of Athaliah, the ingratitude of Joash, *etcetera*.

The Christian reader, in his assessment of these moral examples, will be careful to interpret the text, not only according to ethical standards of the Old Testament, but also in the full light of the Gospel. That is to say, the Christian moral life is always life under the guidance the Holy Spirit, not according to the bondage of the Law.

Still following Cassian's interpretive outline, the fourth level of significance in Holy Scripture--its anagogical or eschatological sense--is the meaning that it has with respect to the Last Things, the definitive fulfillment of all history. Interpreted in this sense, the Books of Chronicles present us with a prophetic adumbration of man's eternal destiny, his worship before the Throne of God in glory. Everything that the Chronicler has to say with respect to priesthood, sacrifice, hymnography, and prayer is a preparation for the everlasting worship described in, say, the Epistle to the Hebrews (for example, 12:18-24) and the Book of Revelation (for example, 5:8-14).

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