

January 8, 2006

The Sunday after Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In addition to the fourfold exegetical pattern outlined by St. John Cassian, let me suggest another Christian avenue to the Old Testament, with a particular application to the Books of Chronicles.

This second approach differs from Cassian in the following way. Cassian's doctrinal outline is constructed on the actual process of the History of Salvation. It begins with the history of the Old Testament in proper sequence, an understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures on their own terms, so to speak, their own meaning in their own settings, and then goes on to examine the Old Testament through the perspective of the New, the lens of Christ. This exegetical process is the movement from Letter to Spirit, in which the meaning of the Old Testament is enhanced by the meaning of the New.

Next, there is the understanding of Sacred Scriptures as they are read and applied in the concrete lives of Christians. Finally, there is the ultimate fulfillment of God's Word when all signs and images have been absorbed into the light of eternal beatitude. This progressive understanding of the Bible in four steps has a discerned chronology.

The approach that I am suggesting does not proceed along that chronological path. It begins, not with the history of the Bible, but with the personal history of the Gentile (like myself) that comes to Christ, not through the inherited history of the Old Testament, but through the original, straightforward proclamation of the Gospel.

I ask myself, why should I be interested in those ancient Hebrew writings in the first place? What connection do they have with me? And I answer, those ancient books have no special connection with me except on account of Christ. Christ alone is my link to those writings. That is to say, I don't begin with the Old Testament. I begin with Christ. I commence with the Center. Christ is not only the Mediator between God and man; He is also the mediating principle between the Old Testament and the Church.

In this way we actually begin to grasp the Old Testament according to its spiritual meaning, its allegorical sense, its Christological significance.

In truth and strictly speaking, after all, it is only Christ that makes the Old Testament theologically pertinent to us. Without Christ, the Old Testament is not really our history. We have no continuity with it-it is not part of our memory-except through Christ.

The Christ that is proclaimed brings the Old Testament with Him in the proclamation. Indeed, the barest preaching of the Gospel includes the Old Testament, in the sense that what Jesus accomplished for our redemption was "according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15: 1-4). The Christ we proclaim is proclaimed as the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is in these swaddling clothes that the Messiah is adorned.

Our Spirit-prompted acceptance of the Gospel, then, the saving gift of our faith, by which we are joined to Christ, also joins us, through Christ, to ancient faith of the Hebrews that awaited His coming. Through Christ, their history becomes our history; we are engrafted into the Bible's ongoing chronology. The Hebrew Scriptures become our own family album. The history of the Bible and the history of the Church form a single narrative, of which our lives are an integral part.

Let us apply this truth to the Books of Chronicles. First, that taxing list of names, with which the Chronicler begins, has in Christ become our own family tree. Because of Christ, we are part of a single story.

Second, like any family history, the story is selective and told with a distinct purpose. As we have already reflected, that purpose has to do with the understanding that worship is what finally gives meaning to history.

Third, this is true of our own history. The chief task of the Church, on earth as it is in heaven, is the glorification of God in worship. This is a major lesson that the Church is to learn from the Chronicler. The life pleasing to God is the life centered on the orthodox worship that God has revealed to the world in the family history of His people.

Fourth, Israel's ancient temptations to forget this truth is what chiefly brought about the series of disasters narrated in Chronicles. That story, too, is told for our learning, to preserve us from the same lack of discernment, lest we lose our way and become likewise reprobate.

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