

February 12, 2006

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Explicit teaching about an afterlife is somewhat sparse in the Old Testament, but during the age of the Maccabees devout Jews reached a high level of awareness, hope, and expectancy of the resurrection of the dead. That new hope was expressed in new ways. For instance, because of the hope of the resurrection the Jews began to pray for the dead (2 Maccabees 12: 38-45), a custom inherited by the Christian Church and continued to the present day. This is but one of the ways in which Judaism's late hope for the resurrection prepared the path for the coming of the Gospel and the faith of the Christian Church.

The origins of that hope of the resurrection were probably varied and complex, but at least one of its chief components was Israel's inherited sense of justice. Thus, they reasoned, "How could the just God permit the continued persecution and slaying of His servants with no hope of matters being set right in the future?" And they answered, "Well, no, it just isn't possible, so there certainly will be a resurrection in the future, at which time the righteous God will adjust the accounts of history."

The Apostle Paul believed, moreover, that the Resurrection of Jesus vindicated not only the Jewish hope of the resurrection (Acts 23: 6), but also the Jewish argument on which that hope was built: "I have hope in God, which [the Jews] themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust" (24: 15). Both the just and the unjust will rise and, each in his own way, face the music.

It is not difficult to trace in 2 Maccabees 7 the argument leading to that conclusion. This is the story of the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons, an event still honored among Christians by a feast day on August 1. These Maccabean martyrs have always enjoyed a popularity—if that is the word we want—among Christians, and panegyrics on the theme were preached by a number of Church Fathers, east and west, including Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, and Leo the Great of Rome.

In the biblical account of their martyrdom it is not difficult to detect a seven-stage progression of the argument that Jews pursued in their hope of the resurrection. Thus, their testimony, or *martyria*, commences with the first brother's assertion that the righteous man will die rather than be unfaithful to God (7:2). But this willingness to die makes no coherent moral sense if death has the last word on the subject. Therefore the second brother affirms a final resurrection in which God will vindicate the moral decision of the righteous (7:9).

In addition, it is morally imperative that at that final resurrection there be a strict identity between the body of the just man who dies and the body of the just man who is raised again. This stage of the argument, made by the third brother (7:11), testifies that what man suffers in his flesh must be redeemed in his flesh. (Job, earlier, seems to have sensed this too.)

The Apostle Paul will voice the same insistence, by declaring, "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural (*psychikon*) body; it is raised a spiritual (*pneumatikon*) body" (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). In each case here, what is sown is exactly what is raised; there is no discontinuity between the body that dies and the body that is raised.

With inexorable moral logic the fourth brother declares that both kinds of moral choices, good and evil, will be reflected in the "afterlife." Just as the righteous will be vindicated with a resurrection unto life, something quite different awaits the wicked (2 Maccabees 7:14). Resurrection, therefore, necessarily means judgment. This thesis is further specified by the fifth brother, who proclaims that a fearful punishment awaits the wicked (verse 17).

In the argument's sixth stage the biblical author distinguishes between the swift temporary punishment of the righteous, which is corrective and restorative, leading to the humility and a renewal of repentance, and the delayed punishment of the wicked, which comes at the end and is final (7:18-19,32-38). This is a standard theme in 2 Maccabees.

The seventh stage of the argument is social, because man in his body is radically and necessarily social. At the final resurrection, therefore, the righteous will be restored to one another. The mother thus says to the

seventh son just before his death, "So thou shalt not fear this tormentor, but being made a worthy partner with thy brethren, receive death, that in that mercy I may receive thee again with thy brethren" (7:29).

This is an important dimension of the doctrine of the resurrection. We are not going to be raised singly, one by one, but all together. The resurrection is not only the vindication of our physical composition. It also vindicates the social relationships that are based on our physical composition.

Foremost among these relationships, of course, is the family, in which we are related to one another more immediately by our bodies. The final restoration of the family is among the last of God's wonders, when those who have died are given back to one another in their very bodies. This is a message of deep consolation.

The development of moral doctrine in 2 Maccabees, beginning from the adherence to the commandments and proceeding to the resurrected life of incorruption, roughly follows the sequence in the Bible's late Wisdom Tradition. Of Wisdom we read, for instance, "For the beginning of her is the most true longing (*epithymia*) for discipline (*paideia*). And the care of discipline is love: and love is the keeping of her laws: and the keeping of the laws is the firm foundation of incorruption: And incorruption brings near to God. Therefore longing for wisdom leads upwards (*anagei*) to a kingdom." (Wisdom of Solomon 6:18-21).

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