

March 12, 2006

First Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

God's people did not learn monotheism from philosophical speculation, but from living with and reflecting on the God who revealed Himself as "He Who Is."

We recall that Moses, at the burning bush, asked two questions with respect to identity. The first question was *mi 'anoki*--"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" The Voice from the bush, instead of answering Moses' question, promised instead to be with him, *'eh 'immak*.

Moses, by way of response, asks further, "Well, who are You?"

And the Voice answered, *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*-"I Am Who Am." He is *YHWH*, "He Who Is," "the LORD," and He went on to identify Himself as the God, the *EI*, of the patriarchs, though they did not invoke Him by this sacred Name.

The LORD did not say at once that He was the only divinity, but He did make perfectly plain His own "reality." He revealed Himself as *the Being*, *Ho On*, as the Greek translation renders the Name.

From this revelation and its context, Israel came at last to monotheism and its denial of the other gods. Several considerations, it seems, furthered this development.

First, Israel was not commanded to confess "one God" but "one LORD," one *YHWH*. That is to say, this sacred Name belonged to no other god. Is there any other god like unto Him? At every point in its history, Israel gave the same answer--No! His sacred Name was shared by no other god.

Second, Israel was commanded neither to worship nor to fear any other god. This exclusive adherence to a single divinity, found in no other ancient religion, was the burden of the first article of the Decalogue and the basis for all the others.

Third, all the forces of created nature were ascribed to the LORD. In this respect He replaced all the gods associated with natural forces, though He was identified with none of them. Thus, nothing was left to identify the other gods except their images, which were lifeless. And, as the Psalmist and the second half of Isaiah insisted, they were the works of men's hands.

Fourth, alone among the ancient religions, Israel never engaged in theogony. The people of God were singularly disinterested in speculation on the origins of the gods, or, for that matter, about the LORD Himself. The latter speculation was precluded by the LORD's own sacred Name, "He Who Is." It did not require much thought to see that the LORD, as *the Being*, was ultimate and without cause.

Speculation about the origins of the other gods was precluded by . . . well, a lack of interest. If the other gods were neither to be worshipped nor feared, they were simply too insignificant, too negligible, to merit attention. One could safely ignore them. To speculate on their origins would be to credit them with more seriousness than they deserved and more dignity than they were entitled to.

Fifth, although Israel used many verbal images to describe the LORD, He could be represented by no visual image. This was the second article of the Decalogue and an immediate inference from the first. This prohibition asserted that in all creation, whether in heaven, on earth, or under the earth, there was nothing sufficiently like God to represent Him. He bore no resemblance to anything man can otherwise know. He was real; no other god was.

Because He could not be visually represented, the LORD could be known only through His spoken Word. That is to say, He was known only in faith, which comes from hearing. The LORD could be known only in the act of trusting in Him. He revealed Himself in the dynamism, but also the evanescence, of the Voice, not the static but more stable medium of vision. The LORD was not to be pinned down in any permanent way distinct from His own Being. As the invisible God, He manifested His living Being.

Sixth, then, the LORD was the Living God, unlike those gods who were finally reducible to their own images. All else, such as the idols, were dead, or they were, like man, in the process of dying. The LORD was not

wood or stone, nor was He flesh and blood. He was entirely the God of life, conferring being on all that existed, granting life to all that lived.

Such seem to have been the considerations by which Israel arrived at monotheism by at least the sixth century before the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

It is further instructive to reflect that once Israel reached monotheism through these considerations—when, that is to say, the sacred Name YHWH explicitly meant that there were no other really existing gods—Israel stopped using that Name out of a profound reverence. It is the constant unbroken tradition of Israel, since the sixth century before the Incarnation, that the Name YHWH is not to be pronounced, and this tradition has always been respected by the Apostles, the Fathers, the hymnography and prayers, and the whole voice of the Church without dissent.

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