

March 19, 2006

The Second Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Theological reflection on the sufferings of Jesus may well begin with that scene in the Acts of the Apostles where Philip overhears the pilgrim from Ethiopia reading the Book of Isaiah. The passage that the gentleman read was this: " He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; / And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, / So He opened not His mouth. / In His humiliation His justice was taken away, / And who will declare His generation? / For His life is taken from the earth."

The reader inquires of Philip, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" Then, says the Sacred Text, "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him."

It is surely instructive to observe that Philip, in preaching the Gospel to the Ethiopian inquirer, begins with sufferings of Jesus, the Word of the Cross. He speaks of the Lord as the Lamb of God, humiliated and slain for the sins of the world. Perhaps we may say that Philip, in his ministry to this man, was determined to know nothing but Jesus and Him crucified. To this powerful man from the royal court of Ethiopia, Philip preached the weakness of God, which is stronger than men. With this cultured, educated visitor from afar, he shared the foolishness of God, which is wiser than men.

It is further instructive to observe that Philip instructed this man on the sufferings of Jesus in reference to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. That is to say, the preaching of the Gospel, as we see it in the ministry of Philip, deliberately related the message of the Cross to the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures. Were he to write to this Ethiopian later, Philip could say to him, "I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*."

There are three points worthy of remark here. First, there is the historical fact that Jesus suffered and died.

Second, there is the theological interpretation of that fact-namely, the thesis that Jesus' sufferings and death were "for our sins," which means

that the death of Jesus on the Cross was an act of sacrifice, an act of worship. Already, in this earliest stage of the proclamation of the Gospel, the Lord's crucifixion was perceived as a deed of sacrificial atonement. It had the value of what the Old Testament calls a "sin offering," a sacrifice to take away sins and restore man to communion with God. Already, prior to the conversion of St. Paul, and constituting a formal thesis of Christian preaching to which St. Paul appealed, it was affirmed that Jesus not only died on the Cross; He died on the Cross "for our sins"--*hyper ton hamartion hemon*. St. Paul asserted that he received this thesis from the Church and handed it on. This thesis we already find in the preaching of Philip.

Third, this theological interpretation of the death of Jesus was based on a specific reading of the Hebrew Bible: "Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*."

There is a sense in which Philip did for the Ethiopian the complementary opposite of what the risen Jesus did for the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. We recall that these two men, when they met our Lord, were struggling with the scandal and tragedy of His death. They were not struggling with Scripture; they were struggling with the Cross. In order to enable them correctly to understand the Cross, Jesus took them to the biblical writings; "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." We remark on the direction taken. Jesus goes to the Scriptures in order to interpret the Cross.

Philip accomplishes the same thing by going in the opposite direction. When he meets the Ethiopian, this reader in the chariot is not struggling with the Cross; he is struggling with the Scriptures. Indeed, he is more than slightly perplexed about their meaning. Philip asks him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And the reader answers, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Philip then takes the man to the Cross in order to interpret the Bible, the very opposite direction of our Lord, who took His two disciples to the Bible in order to understand the Cross.

Both, of course, are essential. There is no understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures without the Cross. There is no understanding of the Cross without the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures. There is no understanding of what Jesus wrought on the Cross except through the eyes of the

Church, which reads the Cross through the lens of Scripture, even as she reads the Scriptures through the lens of the Cross.

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