

April 2, 2006

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the Apostle Paul speaks of our redemption in Christ, he especially describes it in terms of its effects, the all-encompassing effect being man's reconciliation with God, his restoration to friendship with God.

Such a reconciliation is unintelligible, of course, except on the premise that man, apart from Christ, lived in a state of alienation from--and rebellion against—God, by reason of sin.

Paul asserts repeatedly that because of what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, this ancient and inherited alienation has been removed, and mankind now has access to his Creator. When Paul speaks of such reconciliation, he normally speaks of it in with respect to God the Father: "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (Romans 5: 10-11).

A traditional English word to express this reconciliation with God is the lovely noun "atonement," which literally refers to the act of "setting *at one*," establishing unity, "one-ment" (yes, it was once a real English word), where there had been estrangement before. Etymologically, then, "to atone" means to reconcile. This is the correct biblical sense of atonement: reunion with God.

Paul ascribes this atonement to the redemptive work of God's Son, who reconciled us to God by removing the alienation of sin. He alludes to this theme repeatedly. He tells the rebellious Corinthians, for instance: "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5: 18-19). This latter expression "the word of reconciliation" (*ton logon tes katallages*) refers to the Gospel itself, the message and transmission of what God's Son has accomplished on our behalf and for our benefit.

Paul writes later of this reconciliation as a fact wrought in Christ's crucified body, "And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death" (Colossians 1:21-22).

On the other hand, although this reconciliation with God is real and ontological as it pertains to humanity in general, it is not automatic or self-sufficient with respect to each human being. It must be received in faith. For such reconciliation with God to be realized in a man's life, that man must turn and actively assent to the word of reconciliation from his own side. The "word of reconciliation," then, which is the Gospel, contains an explicit imperative. Paul sharply enunciates this imperative, "we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Reconciliation with God, moreover, necessarily implies reconciliation with all others who are reconciled to God. The ancient divisions of humanity are thus "atoned" in the blood of God's Son. Paul writes of this fact particularly with respect to that most elementary social alienation in Holy Scripture, the division between Jew and Gentile. Of the removal of this estrangement, Paul writes, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:14-17).

Besides theological and social, the atonement is likewise cosmic, a fact we may already have suspected from Paul's assertion, quoted above, that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." Paul elaborates on this theme in a later epistle: "For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things [*ta panta*] to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:19-20). In the blood of Jesus, therefore, all of creation is reconciled to the Father.

To explain how the blood of Jesus "atoned" God and the whole of creation, we will need to explore three other biblical concepts that Paul

employs to speak of the mystery of the Cross: expiation, liberation, and justification.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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