

April 9, 2006

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the biblical concepts supporting St. Paul's theology of atonement, one of the most important, surely, is that of expiation. What does the Apostle mean when he writes, "God set forth [Jesus Christ] as the expiatory in His blood" (Romans 3:25)? Although this is the only time St. Paul uses the noun *hilasterion*, I believe that the full context of his epistles, along with the Old Testament substratum on which they depend, provides the correct and adequate meaning of that term.

If I seem to belabor an obvious point--that we should go to the Bible for enlightenment on the subject of expiation-- let me say that I do so from a sense that some readers of Holy Scripture in recent centuries either have not done so, or have done so inconsistently. They have borrowed misleading ideas from elsewhere.

In classical and Hellenistic Greek, the verb "to propitiate" (*hilaskoma*), when used with a personal object, normally signified the placating of some irate god or hero. It is a curious fact that since the rediscovery of ancient Greek literature in the West, beginning from the Renaissance, there has grown a strong tendency to impose this pagan meaning of "expiation" on the teaching of the Bible.

Understood in this way, Paul is presumed to teach that Jesus, in His self-sacrifice on the Cross, placated God's wrath against sinful humanity. That is to say, the purpose of the shedding of Christ's blood was to propitiate, to assuage an angry Father.

Let me say that this interpretation of the Apostle Paul is very erroneous and should be rejected for three reasons.

First, this picture is difficult to reconcile with Paul's conviction that God Himself is the One who made the sacrifice. How easily we forget that the Cross did cost God something. He is the One that gave up His only-begotten Son out of love for us. It was Jesus' Father "who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). Sacrificial victims are expensive, and in this sacrifice the Father Himself bore the price. He gave up, unto death, that which was dearest and most precious to Him. In the death of Jesus, everything

about God is love, more love, infinite love. There is not the faintest trace of divine anger in the death of Christ.

Second, in those places where Holy Scripture does speak of propitiating the anger of God, this propitiation is never linked to blood sacrifice. When biblical men are said to soften the divine wrath, it is done with prayer, as in the case of Moses on Mount Sinai, or by the offering of incense, which symbolizes prayer. Because blood sacrifice and the wrath of God are two things the Bible never joins together, I submit that authentic Christian theology should also endeavor to keep them apart.

Moreover, when the Apostle Paul does write of God's anger, it is never in terms of appeasement but of deliverance. At the final judgment, when that divine anger, far from being placated, will consume the realm and servants of sin, Christ will deliver us from it, recognizing us as His faithful servants (1 Thessalonians 1:10; Romans 5:9). There will be not the slightest hint of appeasement at that point.

Third, the word *hilasterion*, which I have translated as the substantive "expiatory," seems to have in Paul's mind a more technical significance. In Hebrews 9:5, the only other place where the word appears in the New Testament, *hilasterion* designates the top, the cover, of the Ark of the Covenant, where the Almighty is said to throne between and above the Cherubim. In this context, the term is often translated as "mercy seat," and it seems reasonable to think that this is the image that Paul too has in mind.

On Yom Kippur, the annual Atonement Day, the high priest sprinkled sacrificial blood on that *hilasterion*, "because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions of all their sins" (Leviticus 16:16). Therefore, by saying that God "set forth" (*proetheto*) Jesus as the expiatory, or "instrument of expiation," for our sins, Paul asserts that the shedding of Jesus' blood on the Cross fulfilled the prophetic meaning and promise of that ancient liturgical institution of Israel, reconciling mankind by the removal of the uncleanness, "their transgressions of all their sins." The Cross was the supreme altar, and Good Friday was preeminently the Day of the Atonement. The removal of sins was not accomplished by a juridical act, but a liturgical act performed in great love: "Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Ephesians 5:2). Loving both the Father and ourselves, Jesus brought the Father and ourselves together by what

He accomplished in His own body, reconciling us through the blood of His Cross.

In the Bible, "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11). The victim slain in sacrifice was not the vicarious recipient of a punishment, but the symbol of the loving dedication of the life of the person making the sacrifice. This sacrificial dedication of life is the means by which the sinner is made "at one" with God. Such is the biblical meaning of expiation and the proper context in which to interpret Paul's teaching on the sacrifice of Christ.

©2006 Patrick Henry Reardon

**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](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
**Pastoral Ponderings:**  
[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)