

September 17, 2006

## **Sunday After Holy Cross**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Arguably more than any other person in Christian history, God seems to have chosen the Apostle Paul to demonstrate how the life "in Christ" arrives at insight through experience. That is to say, the reader of the Pauline letters can actually discern, by the simple study of these letters, how their author, in the circumstances of his Christian life, came to perceive certain truths through personal experience.

If this is the case of Paul "more than any other person in Christian history," the reason may be simply that Paul's words are the Word of God. His perceptions of truth through experience were not simply personal; he arrived at them through divinely conferred insight and wrote them down with divinely guaranteed authority. His epistles stand forever as the divinely chosen model of how the Christian arrives at truth through experience. By giving Paul so prominent a place in the Sacred Canon, the Lord surely intended us to learn from his example how to examine the circumstances of our lives in order to attain wisdom in Christ. In Paul, that is to say, we are given a vision of the Christian life itself as revelatory of the dynamism of divine grace.

Instances of such perceptions in Paul lie readily at hand. Take, for example, the instance when Paul sent a fairly rough letter to the Corinthians, sometimes called a "letter of tears" (2 Corinthians 2:4), which Titus carried to the Corinthians on Paul's behalf. Paul was concerned about this letter, as I suppose any of us might be who had poured out our emotions in public. Like Paul, we too would wonder if our words had conveyed exactly the sense we had in mind, or whether those words might give an added offense we never intended.

Paul, who had written the epistle from Asia, agreed to wait at the coastal city of Troas for the return of Titus from Corinth by way of Macedonia. Well, he waited and waited, and he grew more anxious as each day was followed by another, but still no Titus: "I came to Troas to *preach* Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother" (2:12-13).

Finally Paul, distracted by worry, could stand it no longer: "taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia." It is not difficult to see why Paul did this. If we think of him languishing at Troas for some days, perhaps even weeks, it would have been natural for him to sail over to Macedonia, from which direction, after all, Titus was expected. To appreciate this, we should bear in mind that the currents and wind patterns between Troas and Macedonia made an eastward voyage longer and more difficult than a westward voyage, a fact which could easily explain the delay of Titus. Because the Black Sea is normally colder than the Mediterranean Basin (on the

average of ten degrees, if memory serves), the quicker evaporation in the latter causes a strong southwest current to run through the Dardanelles, seriously influencing the speed of travel between Asia and Macedonia. Thus, a trip westward from Troas required only two days (Acts 16:11), whereas the reverse journey might take more than twice that long (20:6).

So Paul decided to risk a trip to Macedonia and there wait for Titus, who arrived in due course (2 Corinthians 7:6). Titus brought to Paul the welcome news that the "letter of tears" had been well received at Corinth (7:7-12).

Now what did Paul, "in Christ," learn from this experience? He learned that the power of the Gospel was displayed in the circumstances of his life. He wrote, "For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life" (2:15-16).

For both Paul and the Corinthians the Gospel had become a matter of empirical evidence and concrete experience. Divine grace had captured them and led them, as though trophies, in a triumphal procession, much like the captives conducted through the city by generals returning from the battlefield. This is the meaning of his reference to God "who *always* leads us in triumph [*thriambevonti*] in Christ" (2:14). Divine grace was not an interpretation that Paul imposed on the event; it was a reality revealed *in* the event. Paul's experience of God's grace in the concrete circumstances of his life gave him insight into a theological truth of general import and application. This is the burden of his modifier "always."

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