

September 24, 2006

## **Saints Juvenaly and Peter the Aleut**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Apostle Paul did not like "hanging around." An industrious go-getter, he preferred to have things settled. Thus, his anxious spirit finding no rest while he waited for Titus at Troas, Paul took early passage over to Macedonia to meet him sooner (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). In short, Paul was not a man much disposed to hang around.

We see this sense of industry even on those occasions when Paul was in prison, a place where many folks are unable to do much more than kill time. Imprisonment was a thing that apparently happened to Paul "more often" (*hyperballontos*--11:23) than he would have liked, but he took those occasions as opportunities for robust hymn singing and a good measure of evangelism (cf. Acts 16:24-34; Philippians 1:12-14). All of which is to say that Paul was not the man just to hang around.

Yet he confessed that on the one occasion when he was obliged, rather literally in fact, to hang around, the Lord used the occasion to instruct him. It was one of those instances in which it is not difficult for the reader to discern Paul arriving at a spiritual insight through a lived experience.

He describes the incident: "If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands" (2 Corinthians 11:30-33).

Now nobody, I submit, is better described as hanging around than a man suspended in a basket over a city wall. Paul wrote of this occasion, however, as one of deliverance. And exactly from what was he delivered? Clearly he was delivered from his enemies, the Nabatean king and the Jews that were trying to have him arrested (Acts 9:22-25). But obviously Paul saw a more significant deliverance in the incident. He wrote explicitly that this occasion of hanging around taught him something about "infirmity." "I will boast," he wrote in respect to it, "in the things which concern my infirmity."

Paul felt his profound helplessness in that situation, and he began to learn, in those days that immediately followed his conversion, a crucial lesson--that divine power is made perfect in human infirmity. It was during that experience of absolute helplessness that Paul came to see that the weakness of God is stronger than men--that when he was weak, then he was strong. He arrived at the important theological

truth that lies at the heart of his theology; namely, we carry this treasure in vessels of clay.

He describes this insight in the same epistle: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed--always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (4:7-10).

If we had only Luke's account of this incident in Acts 9, we might not suspect, perhaps, how important Paul's hanging in that basket proved to be in the formation of his soul. It was there, nonetheless, that he began to perceive an essential dimension of divine strength--namely, that it is perfected in human weakness. This was no piece of theory; it was an insight tested on the quickened pulse of a man obliged to hang, helpless, between heaven and earth, dependent (in a most literal sense) on a source of strength distinct himself.

When I described this experience as "crucial" to Paul's theology, I meant that adjective to bear its full etymological significance. "Crucial" is derived from the Latin *crux*, and in Paul's theology that the Cross signifies the weakness of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-25). Paul experienced divine deliverance in a situation of human helplessness. This is the burden of his metaphor "earthen vessels," fragile containers that hold the treasure of the Gospel. Paul gained this insight into the mystery of grace one night, sliding quietly down the side of the city wall of Damascus. Hanging there in his basket, Paul learned something essential of Jesus hanging on a Cross.

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