

December 3, 2006

Third Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When we think of Adam's fall, there are two passive participles that should come forcefully to our minds: lost and cursed. These two words sum up the human condition without Christ.

First, man is lost. Worse, he continues to get lost. It is a mistake to think of the fallen human being as somehow looking for God. Indeed, the very opposite is true. When the human race fell in Adam, a kind of spiritual inertia came into play, a force that kept him going in the same direction--away from God. Of himself man had no power of initiative to reverse the movement. This is what is meant by the Fall.

If man was to return to God, God had to take the initiative. If God had not sought man out, he would keep going in the same direction--away. This is very clear in the biblical story of Adam's hiding from God immediately after his disobedience. He and all his descendents would still be lying low there in the bushes if God had not come after him, inquiring, "Where are you?"

It was not that God did not know where to find Adam. It was Adam who was lost, rather, not God. God knew where Adam was, but Adam didn't. God's query "Where are you?" was intended to wake lost man up to his real situation. As such, it was the first proclamation of the Gospel, the merciful word that began to reverse the direction of man's existence. Indeed, it was the first step toward the mystery of the Incarnation.

This divine inquiry was necessary, because man had no interest in finding God. It was of God, on the contrary, that Adam was most afraid, because God recognized him to be naked. God understood this and promptly provided a covering for man's nakedness. It was the initial step toward man's final clothing, indicated in St. Paul's exhortation to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14).

But even when confronted by his sin, Adam did not accept the guilt and responsibility. He immediately blamed Eve: "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." Indeed, this response even seems to blame God for the Fall. Adam speaks of Eve as "the woman whom You gave me," as though to say, "I did not ask for a wife; this whole arrangement was your idea. This woman, whom You designed, is the one who got me into this mess."

Eve, for her part, follows Adam's example of passing the blame: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." This too was God's fault, of course, because He created this "creeping thing" (Genesis 1:25). Eve could hardly hold herself responsible for what happened.

Even found, that is to say, fallen man was obviously still lost.

Hence--to come to our second point--fallen man was cursed. In assigning punishment for the original sin, the Lord apparently accepted the order of guilt assigned by Adam and Eve. Accordingly, the snake was the first to be punished, then the woman, and finally the man (3:14-15).

The first word of God's verdict is "cursed" (*'arur*), because an historical curse is the lasting effect of the Fall. The Semitic root of this expression, *'rr*, is found in Akkadian, Ethiopian, and Arabic--in addition to Hebrew. Pronounced out loud, the word sounds, in fact, like a roar. Well, I suppose it should, because both words, *'arur* and "roar" (from the Old English root *ra*) refer to the same thing--a loud and frightening expression of anger. Long before its first written record on Akkadian temple inscriptions, it is obvious that the root *'rr* was an onomatopoeia, a word that imitated a sound, in this case the sound of a lion.

Thus, to be "cursed" (another word, we note, that preserves the same guttural *ur* sound) means to receive a decree of irate and radical disapproval. It signifies expulsion from God's society and communion. Moreover, it is of the nature of a curse that it is effective simply by being pronounced.

The curse incurred by fallen man was related to the very earth from which he was taken: "Cursed is the ground for your sake. . . In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread/ Till you return to the ground,/ For out of it you were taken;/ For dust you are, And to dust you shall return." The curse, that is to say, was man's mortality. What Adam handed on was domination by death; "sin reigned in death" (Romans 5:21). By reason of Adam's Fall, man without redemption is under the reign of death and corruption, because "the reign of death (*regnum mortis*) operates only in the corruption of the flesh" (Tertullian, *On the Resurrection* 47).

This is what Adam bequeathed to his offspring, "the reign of death." To die without the grace of redemption is to die eternally. This is the real curse of death, because to die such a death is to be "lost" in a most radical way, lost in the sense of putting oneself beyond the possibility of being found.

©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
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php