

May 13, 2007

Sunday of the Blind Man

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It was somewhat late in Christian history, I believe, when certain believers were made nervous by Paul's exhortation to the Philippians, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12). I suppose this anxiety was occasioned by the proximity of the noun "salvation" to the verb "work," a juxtaposition that might lead to heaven knows what sorts of heresies. Indeed, one suspects that the decision to translate *katergazesthe* as "work out," instead of the more usual meanings of the verb (such as "achieve," "accomplish," "bring about," or "be engaged in") was prompted in some measure by the same apprehension.

Anyway, commentators were quick to mention that the expression "work out" means something different from "work for." This distinction, however, though it is certainly valid (in the sense that salvation can never be earned), is also something of a distraction from what the apostle has in mind to say. Paul does not mean, "Work out the consequences of being saved." That is to say, there is nothing in the passage to suggest that this working out is the fruit of a salvation already accomplished. On the contrary, in telling the Philippians to "work out" their salvation, Paul is thinking of salvation as something ongoing, not yet achieved, still to be accomplished. Salvation remains to be . . . well, "worked out." The tense implied in the text is the future.

The context, manner, and spiritual atmosphere of this working out, says Paul, is "fear and trembling," and this expression too needs examination. Why fear and trembling?

There are those that believe that the fear and trembling indicate that salvation is somehow still in doubt--that we must work at like the deuce, lest we ultimately lose it. But this interpretation also seems alien to the context. The reason that the apostle gives for our fear and trembling here is not the danger of losing our salvation (though there are other places where the Bible addresses this question too).

The reason for fear and trembling given here in Philippians is, rather, the consideration that "it is *God who works* in you both to will and to act for His good pleasure" (2:13). The motive for our fear in this passage is

not a sense that our salvation is in doubt. On the contrary, it is the awareness that the real "work" in the process of salvation is done by God, who is active in our lives and hearts. This sense of God's holy and transforming activity is the source of our trembling. Whatever work we do, we do because He is at work in us. We do not tremble because of some fear that we may fail. We tremble, rather, because we know that the least effort we can exert respecting salvation comes from the sanctifying influence of divine grace.

This is a special kind of fear. In Holy Scripture, after all, the "fear of God" does not always mean the same thing. For instance, there is a certain kind of fear that is cast out by perfect love (1 John 4:18), whereas there is another fear of the Lord that is said to last forever and ever (Psalms 19:9).

In the present context, I suggest, the fear of the Lord is not the fear of losing Him but the supreme discomfort of His staying with us. It is not a panic caused by the thought of His absence, but the terror engendered by knowledge of His presence. What fascinates us about God, that is to say, is the very thing that makes us tremble before Him.

In this respect, I think, what Rilke wrote of the sense of beauty is most true of the holy Creator of beauty: *Denn das Schöne ist nichts/ als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen/ und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht/ uns zu zerstören--*"For the Beautiful is nothing but the beginning of the Terrifying, which we are yet just able to endure, and we are so fascinated because it calmly disdains to destroy us."

Such was the fear of Moses, I submit, as barefoot he stood before the burning bush, receiving the promise of the holy God's continued presence (Exodus 3:12; 4:12). His was a salvation to be worked out in fear and trembling, for it was God who worked in him both to will and to act (3:8,10,).

Such too was the dread in the heart of Jeremiah, stuttering in fear before the Holy One who knew and formed him in the womb (Jeremiah 1:5-6). The Lord promised His continued presence with this prophet as well (1:8), ever working in him both to will and to act (1:17-19).

It was not the Lord's absence but His holy presence that caused the awestruck Peter to plead, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" And the Lord, ignoring this request, indicated how He would be with this apostle too, working in him both to will and to act (Luke 5:8-11).

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