

September 30, 2007

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Lord's victory over death is the demonstration, not only of His power, but also of His compassion. Given the full human trauma of death, both remedies are required.

Death, after all, entails not only the collapse of the personal human structure (the separation of soul and body, the physical decay of the latter, and the eternal loss of the former), but also the radical dissolution of society, the decomposition of human relationships, the severing of those ties of love that bind us mortal beings together. If the power of Christ can be said to remedy the problem of personal corruption, perhaps we can say that the compassion of Christ is directed against our dilemma of social dissolution. Having considered the power of the risen Christ with respect to the one, therefore, it is time to reflect on His compassion with respect to the other.

When God's holy Word portrays the compassion of Jesus in the presence of death, our attention is directed chiefly at the obvious social consequence of death, the separation that it creates among loved ones. This perspective is clear, for instance, in the story of the widow of Nain, who had lost her only son. "When the Lord saw her," we are told, "*He had compassion on her* and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise'" (Luke 7:13-14, emphasis added). In this text we observe that nothing is said about the Lord's concern for the dead man; it speaks only of his compassion for the mother. It is to her grieving heart that Jesus directs His attention. Indeed, our Lord exercises here His power over death in order to express His compassion over sorrow, and this priority is conveyed by Luke's remark that Jesus "presented him to his mother" (7:15).

The same perspective is also clear, I think, in the story of the raising of Lazarus. As our Lord approaches the tomb of His deceased friend, He first encounters the two sorrowing sisters, both of whom say, "If You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21,32). This near-reproach by the sisters gives voice not only to a fact but also to a feeling. Consequently, John goes on to portray the compassion of Jesus as He comes to the tomb. Prior to manifesting His power with respect to the dead man ("Lazarus, come forth!"), Jesus first displays His compassion for the grieving sisters ("And Jesus wept.") That is to say, Jesus first addresses the feeling before He deals with the fact. Indeed, the prior depth of His mercy is what prompts the ensuing display of His power.

In both these cases the Lord's first attention is directed, then, not to the persons that have died, but to those that are left behind, the dear ones that death has touched and deeply wounded. For death is not only decay; it is also bereavement at the loss of loved ones. Just as the power of Christ prevails in the first, so His compassion prevails in the second, because victory over death means both things. Consequently, when "there shall be no more death," we are assured, there shall also be "no sorrow nor crying" (Revelation 21:4).

Significantly, our extant literature's first reference to the resurrection of the dead was addressed to Christians suffering bereavement at the loss of loved ones. In A. D. 50 Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, *lest you sorrow* as others who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13, emphasis added). The apostle then went on to expound the doctrine of the resurrection as the foundation of Christian comfort, and he finished by exhorting the bereaved, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (4:18). That is to say, Paul wrote those expressions of hope in order to address, not the problem of despair, but the pangs of sadness.

What the resurrection promises to Christians, then, is not only their personal integrity recovered and transfigured in glory but also the final and transformed restoration of their community, all those loving tendrils that tie them together and comprise a "we." Thus, Paul uses entirely corporate language to describe this foundation of the Christian hope: "*we* shall always be with the Lord" (4:17). And again, "If in this life only *we* have hope in Christ, *we* are of all men the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:19). For this reason, the hope of believers is necessarily a shared expectation of comfort, when "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17).

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