

December 30, 2007

Sunday after Christmas

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Very early it became customary for Christians to structure their daily rule of prayer on the sequence of the events of Good Friday. Our first extant witness to this custom, Hippolytus of Rome, testified that he had received it from a tradition going back to the Apostles themselves.

Writing about the year 210, Hippolytus spoke about prayer at certain fixed times of the day. Of these fixed times, we should especially note what he wrote of the third, sixth, and ninth hours, set times of prayer that Christians inherited from Jewish piety (cf. Daniel 6:10-13; 9:21; Acts 3:1; 10:3,9,30).

At the third hour, traditionally the time of the morning sacrifice in the Temple, Hippolytus wrote, "And if you are at home, pray at the third hour and bless God. But if you are elsewhere at that time, pray to God in your heart. For at that hour Christ was nailed to the tree. For this reason, likewise, the Old Law prescribed that the showbread should be offered constantly as a type of the Body and Blood of Christ, and the slaughter of the unreasoning lamb is the type of the perfect Lamb. For Christ is the Lamb and the Bread that comes down from heaven" (*The Apostolic Tradition* 41).

This rich text is significant in two ways. First, Hippolytus elaborates a Eucharistic theology of the Cross through Old Testament types taken from the Temple worship: the daily showbread and each morning's offering of a sacrificial lamb. Second, Hippolytus speaks of Jesus' crucifixion at the third hour, the only ancient liturgical source to do so.

With respect to prayer at the sixth hour, Hippolytus wrote, "Pray likewise at the sixth hour, because when Christ was nailed to the wood of the Cross, the day was divided, and darkness fell. So at that hour let them pray a powerful prayer, imitating the voice of Him who prayed and made all creation dark for the unbelieving Jews."

Finally, with respect to the ninth hour, or late afternoon, Hippolytus observed that "at that hour the side of Christ was pierced and poured out water and blood; giving light to the remaining time of the day, He brought it to evening. Then, as He commenced His sleep and started the beginning of a new day, He fulfilled the type of the Resurrection." The death of Jesus was thus placed at the time of the daily evening sacrifice in the Temple.

In his descriptions of prayer at the sixth and ninth hours, we observe that Hippolytus concentrates on the themes of light and darkness as they pertained to Good Friday. When the sun was expected at its noonday zenith, the day was suddenly divided by three hours of darkness. Then, when Jesus died, the light appeared again. When the ensuing darkness came at nightfall, Hippolytus recognized the beginning of a new day. This last perspective followed that of Holy Scripture, where the day begins with the evening.

What is perhaps most striking about this rule of daily prayer in Hippolytus is its obvious dependence on another Roman source, this one of undeniably apostolic times, the Gospel according to Mark. We may observe the points of this resemblance.

First, with respect to the third hour, the time that Hippolytus assigns to the crucifixion, we read in Mark. "'Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him" (15:25). Mark is the only evangelist to place the crucifixion at the third hour. This detail handed down in the Roman narrative tradition, and a specific point that distinguished it from that of Ephesus (cf. John 19:14), is shared with only one other ancient Christian writer and him a Roman, Hippolytus.

Second, Mark fixes the sixth hour as the time when darkness covered the whole earth, and the ninth hour as the time of Jesus' death. In all of these details he is followed by Hippolytus.

In both Mark and Hippolytus, then, Jesus is crucified at the hour of the morning sacrifice and dies at the hour of the evening sacrifice. He is thus portrayed as the prophetic fulfillment of the two lambs offered daily with the incense in the temple. Midway between those two times was the sixth hour, when a great darkness fell upon the whole earth-Egypt's ninth plague, the plague that immediately preceded the death of the First Born.

Thus, the Christian's daily round of prayer is concentrated on the mystery of the Cross, in the power of which all efficacious prayer is offered.

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