

February 17, 2008

The Sunday of the Pharisee and the Publican

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although several aspects of the subject render it impossible to trace the exact lines of a "development" in the self-awareness of Jesus, the Gospel of Luke does speak explicitly of His *growth* in wisdom (2:40,52). Luke also indicates that this acquired personal wisdom pertained to Jesus' understanding of the Sacred Scriptures (4:16-21).

It was in the context of this biblical understanding that our Lord, at an early age, spoke of God as "My Father" (2:49). Our record of this fact places the incident about eighteen years prior to the public event in which God called Jesus "My beloved Son" (3:22; compare 2:42 and 3:23).

This was not the last time Luke touched on the theme of Jesus' identity and the Holy Scriptures. About halfway through his account of the public ministry, Luke tells us that Jesus raised the question with the disciples: "Who do the crowds say that I am?" The varied answers, if we look at them carefully, are very curious. Evidently everyone who addressed the subject thought Jesus was someone else! Some identified Him as a revived John the Baptist, while others thought Him to be the returned Elijah or one of the ancient prophets raised to life (9:18-19).

This was a most extraordinary phenomenon, without strict parallel, as far as I know, anywhere else in history: Jesus' contemporaries apparently were not content to say that Jesus of Nazareth was, plain and simple, Jesus of Nazareth. They were determined to identify Him with someone else from Israel's past.

The disciples, for their part, confessed Him to be the long awaited Messiah (9:20). Although Jesus recognized the publication of this identity would be seriously misunderstood (9:21), He did not deny it. It is clear He already knew Himself to be the promised Heir of the Davidic covenant.

Jesus went on, however, to join this messianic identification with two other biblical figures: Daniel's Son of Man and Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Combining these images, He immediately told the disciples, "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day" (9:22). Clearly Jesus had come to understand Himself as identified with these prophetic figures--Messiah, Suffering Servant, and Son of Man---all of whom the Bible associated with the advent of God's Kingdom and the fulfillment of Israel's historical destiny. These three biblical figures were existentially fused in the self-consciousness of God's Son. It was through them that Jesus "grew" to know who He was and what the Father expected of Him.

Luke, as though to preclude any lingering doubts on the point, immediately went on to emphasize it again. Taking the traditional story of the Transfiguration (Mark 9: 1-8; Matthew 17: 1-9), Luke gave a substantially larger and more defined role to the two Old Testament prophets, Moses and Elijah, as they appeared with Jesus. He wrote, "Two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His exodus which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9: 31-32). It was during this prophetic discussion with Jesus that the divine voice once again proclaimed, "This is My beloved Son" (9: 35).

This section of Luke (9: 18-36) rests on a single preoccupation: Who is Jesus? Luke repeatedly stresses the Old Testament figures and prophecies through which Jesus took stock of His identity and vocation: Messiah, Suffering Servant, Son of Man. As God's Son, He is identified in all of these ways through the mysteries of His birth and life, His suffering and death, His resurrection and exaltation at God's right hand.

Having fulfilled all the prophecies inherent in these biblical images--and having "learned obedience by the things which He suffered, and having been perfected" (Hebrews 5: 8-9)--Jesus revealed to the Church the mystery of His identity. His disciples, inasmuch as "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures," now know Him through a gracious participation in His own self-understanding. The Church thus comprehends the Sacred Scriptures through the eternal Word's human, historical subjectivity, the innate knowledge of Himself identical with the understanding of those Scriptures. Christology and exegesis are one study.

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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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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