

June 8, 2008

The Sunday after the Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

There are two stories in Holy Scripture that end with an unanswered proposition: the Book of Jonah and the parable of the Prodigal Son. The drama in both these stories builds to the propositions with which they end. That is to say, it is the point of the stories themselves. In each case, moreover, this proposition, which is directly put to a character in the story, is implicitly addressed to the reader as well.

This correspondence between the two narratives invites their further comparison. In fact, they are similar in other respects.

First, they have the same theme: both are stories of the divine mercy bestowed on the unworthy—the Ninevites and the younger son, both of whom are described as sinners: Of the younger son we are told that he "wasted his possessions with prodigal living," the inheritance acquired by his father's lifetime of hard work (Luke 15:13). As for Nineveh, the story of Jonah begins by mentioning the wickedness of the place (Jonah 1:2).

In both accounts, nonetheless, the sinners are brought to repentance. Thus, the king in Nineveh decreed, "let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell whether God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?" (Jonah 3:8-9) We learn also of the resolve of the parable's younger son: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son'" (Luke 15:18-19).

These humble expressions of repentance are immediately answered by the outpouring of the divine mercy. Thus, when the younger son "was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him" (15:20). As for the Ninevites, "God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). In both cases, then, the sinners are forgiven and reconciled.

Second, each of these accounts involves an antagonist—Jonah and the older brother, both of them resentful that God's mercy is available to the repentant sinners. These antagonists, each described as "angry" about God's mercy (Jonah 4:1,4,9; Luke 15:28)), are essential to the drama. Since the final proposition in both stories—their intended point and purpose—is addressed to this angry resentment, a proper understanding of the two narratives requires that we examine these antagonists in detail.

First, the Book of Jonah is not really about Nineveh, but about Jonah. Nineveh, we are told, repented and was forgiven, but we are not so sure about Jonah. From the beginning, after all, Jonah resisted the divine intent to forgive Nineveh—even to the point of running away from the face of the Lord (1:3,10). Only when absolutely forced to do so, did Jonah give even a brief warning to the Ninevites: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4)

It is essential to the story that Jonah did not *want* the Ninevites to repent. After all, the city was well known to be vile (Nahum 1:14), "full of lies and robbery" (3:1), the "mistress of sorceries" (3:4). Accordingly, self-righteous Jonah wanted its citizens to get exactly what they deserved, and what made him most uncomfortable was the fact that the Lord was "a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness" (Jonah 4:2). Unable to appreciate the irony that he himself had been given a second chance when he was released from the belly of the sea monster, Jonah wanted no mercy shown to the Ninevites.

Second, the story of the Prodigal Son is not really about the younger son, but about his older brother, who resents the mercy shown to the repentant sinner. Like Jonah arguing with the Lord (Jonah 4:8-9), this self-righteous son finds fault with his father for showing such mercy (Luke 15:29-30).

The closing proposition in each case—"Should I not pity Nineveh?" and "It was right that we should make merry and be glad"—forces the reader himself into the place of the antagonist. Like Jonah and the older son, he is obliged to choose between a natural sense of retributive righteousness and the mercy manifest in God's acceptance of the sinner. He must decide whether to cling angrily to the blindfold of justice or to accept the possibility of a new heart. That is to say, the reader himself must repent.

Each story ends with this decision still open.

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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
Pastoral Ponderings:
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