

December 7, 2008
The Feast of Saint Ambrose

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The first person to reflect on the salvific meaning of the sufferings and death of Jesus was—it would seem—Jesus.

It would be quite remarkable, in fact, if this were not the case. Jesus certainly knew His enemies were endeavoring to kill Him, and the gospel stories indicate that their efforts began to take shape rather early in His ministry (cf. Mark 3:6). Several times, moreover, Jesus referred to His coming sufferings and death (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). In addition, it is clear that Jesus did not attempt to escape that fate. Indeed, he not only put himself in danger by his public appearances among His adversaries, he also knew the identity of His betrayer.

Knowing all this, Jesus sought and pondered the meaning of what lay ahead, and in the Holy Scriptures He found several inherited patterns that came to dominate His interpretation of what was to befall Him.

For instance, the biblical stories of the prophets made it very clear that they were liable to rejection and even a violent death. Jesus saw His own ministry in continuity with theirs (Matthew 23:34-36).

A second such pattern was that of the persecuted just man, the character who dominates so much of the Psalter. In the Passion narratives, in fact, we find Jesus adopting as His own the prayer of that just man (27:46; Luke 23:46).

A third pattern was provided in the Isaian oracles of the faithful Servant of the Lord, that mysterious figure whose sufferings were to reconcile the people to God. Although the identity of this figure was unclear to readers of Isaiah (cf. Acts 8:32-34), it was of a piece with the post-exilic conviction that only great suffering could bring about Israel's restoration and reconciliation with God. As we shall reflect presently, Jesus referred to this Servant of the Lord in the assessment of His own vocation.

Jesus found a fourth interpretive pattern of His coming Passion in various biblical symbols of deliverance. Arguably most prominent among these was the image of the Bronze Serpent, which Moses lifted up in the desert (John 3:14-15). It is instructive to observe that our Lord, in applying this image to His own crucifixion, did not make a direct and immediate jump back to Numbers 21; he interpreted that text, rather, through the later lens of the Wisdom of Solomon (16:5-7). That is to say, He grasped the historical event as it lived in Israel's understanding of it.

It is important, I believe, to see that Jesus' interpretation of His coming Passion drew on more than one biblical passage, theme, or book. We find Him seeking guidance in each of the three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (mainly Psalms).

For all His references to His coming sufferings, however, the New Testament contains only two statements of Jesus that enunciate the soteriological significance of those sufferings: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) and "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many" (14:24). In these two passages it is clear that Jesus recognized that God's deliverance of man was to be effected in His

own Passion.

It has long been recognized that both these passages evoke the Isaian theme of the Servant of the Lord, whose sufferings would reconcile Israel to God. Jesus saw Himself to be that Servant of the Lord.

There are two important points to be made about Jesus' interpretive appeal to Isaiah.

First, the beneficiary of the Servant's redemption was Israel. That is to say, Jesus saw Himself as dying for the liberation and reconciliation of the Chosen People. He recognized no real distinction between the restoration of God's People and the forgiveness of their sins. Redemption, as conveyed in this teaching, was corporate, not individual.

Second, Jesus made this appeal to the Lord's Suffering Servant in a specifically moral context, by way of teaching His disciples how they were to live. They were not to live by the patronal system of the world—the ethics of sponsorship—but by that of loving service. Believers were not to model their behavior on the world's standards, whereby those that exercise authority are called benefactors. Jesus regarded His Passion, therefore, as the supreme embodiment of His teaching, the defining enactment of the pattern of life He presented to His disciples.

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