

February 1, 2009

The Eve of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Readers of Genesis 22---from Sirach to Kierkegaard---have pondered long what thoughts may have intruded themselves into the struggling mind of Abraham when the Lord required him to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice.

Perhaps the most insuperable problem was one of logic: How did Abraham reconcile in his thought the imminent loss of his son with the Lord's earlier promise that this same son would be the father of many people? Just how could he resolve the contradiction between God's promise, which he completely believed, and God's command, which he was completely resolved to obey?

In fact, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in the earliest Christian commentary on this story, explicitly cited God's earlier promise---"in Isaac your seed shall be called"---in the context of the command that Isaac was to be sacrificed (Hebrews 11:18). How was it possible to reconcile God's promise with God's command? Abraham had three days to think about it.

The author of Hebrews reflected that Abraham, in order to resolve that contradiction, must have introduced into his reasoning process one further consideration---to wit, God's power: "He reasoned that God . . . was able"---*logisamenos hoti . . . dynatos ho Theos*.

The wording of this argument is quite precise. In speaking of God, the author of Hebrews uses the adjective *dynatos* instead of the verb *dynatei* ("was able" instead of "could"). He thereby indicated he was thinking of an abiding quality of God---His power.

Abraham had already experienced God's power in the conception of Isaac, when he and Sarah, for all practical purposes, were as good as dead: "And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb" (Romans 4:19).

In other words, Abraham reasoned that God's power had already overcome the forces of death in the very circumstances of Isaac's conception. And if God had overcome death once, He was always able. Thus, with regard to Isaac, says Hebrews, Abraham "considered that God was able [*dynatos*] to raise from the dead."

When the Sadducees challenged Jesus about the resurrection from the dead, He likewise appealed to the power of God. "Are you not therefore mistaken," He asked, "because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power [*dynamis*] of God?" (Mark 12:24) And it is passing curious that Jesus spoke of both Abraham and Isaac in that context of the resurrection: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." By way of explaining the reference, Jesus concluded, "He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living" (12:26-27).

For the author of Hebrews, the mind of ancient Abraham raced ahead in prophecy to the doctrine of the resurrection---it was an experienced inference from what he already knew of God. From the very temptation he endured, Abraham arrived at a new understanding of God---namely, that He is powerful to raise the dead to life. This was a true prophetic revelation granted to the struggling mind of His servant.

St. Augustine was much impressed by this story. "The pious father," he wrote, "faithfully clinging to this promise---because it had to be fulfilled by the one whom God commanded him to kill---did not doubt that this son, whom he had had no hope of being given to him, could be restored to him after his immolation [*sibi reddi poterat immolatus*]."

For the author of Hebrews, the restoration of Isaac was enacted "in parable" (*en parabole*--Hebrews 11:19). St. Augustine, translating "parable" here as *similitudo*, correctly understood it to refer to the Resurrection of Christ, when God's Son was restored to Him after His immolation on the Cross. There was a "likeness"---*similitudo*---between God and Abraham, revealed in the mystery of the Resurrection (*The City of God* 16.32).

Why did God test Abraham? In order to reveal an essential aspect of Himself: His power over death. Abraham arrived this truth through the furnace of his mind, as he struggled to reconcile God's promise with His command. God's power over death was not an abstract truth of theology, available to abstract thought; it was learned on the pounding pulse of an ancient Mesopotamian, as he assumed a personal likeness to the very God who put him to the trial.

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