

February 15, 2009

The Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Paul's metaphor of the Gentile Christians as branches engrafted into the ancient stock of Israel (Romans 11:16-28) is more than the account of a past event. It pertains, in addition, to every instance of someone's conversion to Christ. Each baptism is an act of engrafting into what the Latin Psalter calls the *congregatio . . . ab initio*, "the congregation . . . from the beginning." To become a Christian is to take one's place in that congregation, the historical continuity of Israel and the Church. It is to become a child of Abraham and, therefore, an heir to the promises made to Abraham.

Because this process of conversion begins with the *kerygma*---the proclamation of the Gospel---it cannot be separated from the mystery of God's Word in the Holy Scriptures. By this, I mean the whole Bible, the Scriptures of both Testaments.

It is important to make this point, I believe, because of a widespread disposition to separate---and even to oppose---the Law and the Gospel.

The uncritical acceptance of this separation of Law and Gospel, it seems to me, has adversely affected common pastoral practice respecting conversion and pre-baptismal catechesis. Unless I am seriously mistaken, it is unusual nowadays for those joining the Christian Church to have a strong sense of embracing the history and Scriptures of ancient Israel.

This was not the case when St. Paul proclaimed the Gospel and brought new members into the Church. For instance, when he reminded the Corinthians of the time of their conversion, he wrote: "I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4 emphasis added). Those "Scriptures" were the only ones Paul knew: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. As is clear in this text, those Scriptures were integral to the Gospel itself. Paul was familiar with no *kerygma* without the Old Testament.

Indeed, when he was accused of "abolishing" (*katargein*) the Torah by proclaiming the Gospel, he insisted that he was, on the contrary, "establishing" (*histanein*) the Torah (Romans 3:31). He went on to demonstrate that justification by faith, a principle integral to the Gospel, was also taught in the Torah (4:9-25), as well as the Psalms (4:6-8). Earlier in the same epistle, he had appealed to the Prophets to make the same point (1:17).

In perceiving the Gospel message in all three sections of the Hebrew Bible, Paul's thesis is identical with what we find in Luke, where the risen Jesus says to the Church, "These are the words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And then, writes Luke, "He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the

Scriptures" (24:44-45).

When the Apostles received the Great Commission, it was in the setting of their understanding of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. At the very beginning of the Gospel proclamation we declare, "Thus it is written" (24:46).

For this reason, the proclamation of the Gospel is always an exercise in Old Testament interpretation, as we constantly find throughout the Acts of the Apostles.

When we speak of the Bible in the context of the Gospel proclamation, we should think of it as a "history book," not only in the sense that it records history, but also that it was produced within that history, is reflective of various stages and experiences in that history, and gives structure and direction to the same ongoing history.

That is to say, the Bible---the Old Testament and the New---is an essential component of the *quid continuum historicum*, which is the one people of God. The Bible pertains to the Church's being, providing both the material substance and the formal structure of Her proclamation, catechesis, dogmatic determinations, and theological reflection.

It was theoretically possible, of course, for God to establish His Church without the Bible, just as it is conceivable that the Church could have been constituted without Sacraments. None of these speculations, however, is theologically significant. The only real Church is the Church holding the Bible.

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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
phri@touchstonemag.com

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

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php