

June 7, 2009

Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Jesus also spoke of Himself as the Son of Man without explicit reference to either eschatology or the Cross. He declared, for instance, that "the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28), that He "has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20), that He "came eating and drinking" (11:19), and that He "sows the good seed" (13:37). In short, the Son of Man is Jesus Himself (Matthew 16:13; Luke 6:22; 11:30-32; 12:10 17:22; 19:10; John 6:27,53,62; 13:31). This great variety of contexts indicates that "the Son of Man" became Jesus' normal expression of self-reference, the equivalent of "I."

For all the attention the title receives in the gospels, "the Son of Man" did not much appear outside those four books, either as a confessional title for Jesus or as a way of invoking Him. By reason of its eschatological meaning in Daniel, the expression pertained to the self-interpretation of Jesus in immediate context of His life and death, but that meaning rarely carried over to the development of Christology.

Indeed, with the decline of apocalyptic concerns---as Church membership became more Gentile than Jewish---the expression "the Son of Man" was used less frequently. Inasmuch as the term never appears in the epistles of Paul, this decline certainly happened very early.

We observe this in the Church Fathers. When they spoke of "the Son of Man" in an eschatological sense, the Fathers were usually just citing the gospels or Daniel. Thus, Justin Martyr wrote: "He shall come on the clouds as the Son of Man, as Daniel foretold, and His angels shall come with Him" (*Dialogue* 31). Or again, Cyril of Jerusalem: "He is called the Son of Man, not because He had His generation from this earth, but because He is coming on the clouds to judge both the living and the dead" (*Catechesis* 10.4; cf. Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 12.44).

Even this usage was rare, however. More often, when the Fathers called Jesus "the Son of Man," the term was employed to mean His human nature. We find this development very early. For example, referring to our Lord's descent from the root of Jesse, Ignatius of Antioch spoke of Him as "the Son of Man and the Son of God" (*Ephesians* 20.4).

Irenaeus of Lyons is particularly interesting in this respect: When he cited Daniel's vision of Jesus, he did so in order to argue for the integrity of Jesus'

humanity (*Adversus Haereses* 4.20.11). That is to say, his interest in "the Son of Man" lay in the Incarnation rather than the Final Judgment. Moreover, when he returned to the expression somewhat later, Irenaeus left out Daniel all together, concentrating entirely on the Incarnation in the economy of salvation: "The Lord professes Himself to be the Son of Man, comprising in Himself that original man---from whom was fashioned the composition of the woman---so that, as our race went down to death through fallen man, we might ascend to life through the One who was victorious" (5.20.1).

Thus, "the Son of Man" came to describe the Word as incarnate, rather than Jesus as the destined heir and judge of history. The term was loosened from its apocalyptic origin, in order to bolster the orthodox faith against Christological heresies.

Especially was this the case during the Arian controversy. Jesus is called the Son of Man, wrote Athanasius of Alexandria, "according to the flesh and His human appearance" (*kata sarka kai anthropinon Avtou deiknousin*---*Letters to Serapion* 4.20). Gregory the Theologian expressed the same thesis: "He is Son of Man on account of Adam and of the Virgin, from whom He was born" (*Orationes* 30.21).

The title "Son of Man," however, even as referring to the Word's assumed humanity, was understood to embrace His whole person. Commenting on the "lifting up" of the Son of Man in John 3, John Chrysostom wrote: "In this place He did not call only the flesh 'Son of Man,' but He named His entire self, as it were, from what was his lower being"---*apo tes elattonos ousias* (*Homilies on John* 27.1).

Notwithstanding this doctrinal development of "the Son of Man," Jesus' understanding of Daniel's vision remains prominent in the evangelical mission of the Church. Even as He bade us to go forth and make disciples of all nations, our Lord based that mandate on the premise, "All authority [*pasa exsousia*] in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (Matthew 28: 18).

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