

March 21, 2010

Fifth Sunday of Great Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When we pray the Psalms, we are faced with a particular challenge not usually found in other prayers. I think of it as a diversity of voices---what the Church Fathers called a plurality of persons, or "faces," *prosopa*.

This phenomenon is not common to most other forms of prayer. Normally, when I speak to God, the "voice" of the prayer is first person, whether singular or plural; I pray either as "I" or "we." We petition the Holy Spirit to "come and abide in us," for example, or beseech the Lord, "take from me the spirit of sloth." We adopt this first person voice as a natural assumption.

It is a mistake, however, to bring this assumption---uncritically---to the Psalms. Indeed, to do so may lead to some very disordered prayer. If, for instance, I think of myself as the "voice" who prays, "reward me according to my innocence," or "my heart is not lifted up," I am plunged into a serious conflict with truth; there is not a speck of "innocence" in my heart, which is almost always "lifted up." In other words, I turn my prayer into a flight from reality, if I assume the "I" in the Psalms invariably refers to me.

In respect to this variety of "voices," the Psalms exemplify a larger interpretive concern pertinent to Holy Scripture: In the Bible, revelation takes place, not only when God speaks to man, but also, on occasion, when man speaks to God, and even when man speaks to man on God's behalf. All of these instances are the "voices" of revelation.

Philo, a Jewish contemporary of the New Testament, commented on this phenomenon in his *Life of Moses*: "The statements [*logia*] are partly spoken in the person [*prosopon*] of God through the mouth of the prophet, partly revealed as God's will in question-and-answer form, and partly uttered in the person [*prosopon*] of Moses while he was under the influence of the Spirit and in ecstasy" (3.188).

Now, before declaring this an unnecessarily complicated arrangement, it is best to recall that God Himself provided it. The Lord spoke to Moses about the coming of his brother Aaron: "Now you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do. So he shall be the spokesman [*dibber*] for you to the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God" (Exodus 4: 15-16). Pharaoh---alas for him---failed to follow all this.

Briefly put, the whole Bible is God's Word, even in those words by which man

speaks to God. Revelation is conveyed, not only when the Lord tells Habakkuk, "the just shall live by his faith," but also when Habakkuk inquires, "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear?" (2:4; 1:1) In Habakkuk---as in Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others---revelation takes on the quality of a "conversation," or *dialogia*.

This complex quality of divine revelation is---if possible---even more pronounced when the Bible is read through Christian eyes. We should have expected as much, since it was Jesus who raised the point. He raised it, in fact, in respect to the Psalter: "David himself said by the Holy Spirit: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" Therefore David himself calls Him 'Lord'; how is He then his Son?" (Mark 12:36-37). With this exegetical question, Jesus dropped a very large hint that the words "Lord" and "Son" were possessed of more than one reference in the Psalter.

"Conversation" is especially a trait of the Psalms, where we discover, not only ourselves speaking to God about Christ, but also Christ speaking to His Father about us, and so on. The voices will vary, not only in each psalm, but also during the course of a single psalm.

According to Justin Martyr, the Jews who rejected Jesus were deceived by a failure to recognize this variety of "voice" references. The Divine Word, he said, "sometimes speaks as from the person [*apo prosopou*] of God, the Ruler and Father of all, sometimes as from the person [*apo prosopou*] of Christ, sometimes from the person [*apo prosopou*] of the peoples answering the Lord or His Father."

Justin went even further, arguing that pagan literature itself had analogies to this "conversation" quality of the biblical writings; he told Marcus Aurelius, "You may observe this even in your own writers, when one writer speaks for all but introduces other persons in a conversation [*prosopa dialegomena*]" (*First Apology* 36).

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