

August 1, 2010

Sunday Before the Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When God the Father---according to Luke---declared to Jesus, at His baptism, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased" (3:22), our Lord could not have failed (nor can we) to recognize an historical and literary reference in that declaration. He called to mind, at that moment, how God had told Abraham, "Take now your beloved son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2 LXX).

The Father's declaration at the baptism thus introduced into Christian reflection a theological correspondence between Isaac and Jesus---and, therefore, between Abraham and God. This correspondence was acknowledged in Paul's affirmation that God "did not spare His own Son [*tou idiou Hyiou*], but handed Him over [*paredoken*] for us all" (Romans 8:32).

This correspondence conveys two Christological truths:

First, the Father's unique love for Jesus as His dear Son, foreshadowed in Abraham's paternal affection for Isaac.

Second, the Father's will to hand over His Son in sacrifice, prefigured in the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Paul's vocabulary renders this correspondence unmistakable: God "did not spare [*epheisato*] His own Son." No one familiar with the story of Abraham could miss the reference: "you have done this thing, and have not spared [*epheiso*] your beloved son for Me" (Genesis 22:16 LXX).

I do not believe---let me be clear---it is Paul's point to allude to Genesis 22. The allusion is made *en passant*, rather, as the supposition in a larger argument. It is important to regard the whole context: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" That is to say, the reference to the story of Abraham pertains to the argument's premise: "*Because* God did not spare His own Son . . ." The Apostle's intended inference is, "how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

As for the premise---"He who did not spare His own Son"---Paul assumed the Romans were familiar with it. They already knew it as a Christological theme, whether in catechesis or hymnography. The correspondence between Isaac and Jesus---and between Abraham and God---came to the Church through the revelation our Lord received from the Father's voice.

Eighteen years earlier (Compare Luke 2:42 and 3:23), Jesus had declared He "must be about the things of My Father," *en tois tou Patros mou dei einai me*

(2:49). Now, in the baptism, He begins to comprehend more specifically what are these "things of My Father." From this moment on, the necessity (*dei*, "must"), of which Jesus spoke to His parents in the Temple, starts to assume a more defined shape.

The Cross, foretold by Simeon when our Lord was yet an infant (2:34-35), begins now---at His baptism---to cast a grim shadow over His sense of vocation and destiny. As enemies reject Jesus' mission, the threat grows more defined and explicit: "The Son of Man must [*dei*] suffer many things" (9:22). "I must [*dei*] journey today, tomorrow, and the next day, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem" (13:33). "For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day. But first He must [*dei*] suffer many things and be rejected by this generation" (17:24-25). "I say to you that this which is written must [*dei*] still be accomplished in Me: 'And He was numbered with the transgressors'" (22:37).

When Jesus first spoke of God as "My Father," the context of this self-awareness was His participation in Israel's corporate study of Holy Scripture: "they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers" (2:46-47). This "understanding" (*synesis*) of Himself and the Scriptures---doubtless identical with the "wisdom" (*sophia*) in which, Luke tells us, Jesus continued to grow (2:40,52)---took on a more exact and exacting shape at His baptism.

According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, our Lord, "though being a Son, learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (5:8). It is chiefly Luke, I believe, who tells how---through experience---this obedience was learned.

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