

October 24, 2010

Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Closer attention to the "voice from heaven" suggests further aspects of the baptismal experience of Jesus. When the Father addressed Him as "beloved Son" and declared Himself "well pleased," these expressions were not entirely--if the word be allowed---*original*. Indeed, they evoked in the mind of Jesus two biblical texts with which He was already familiar from those years of study in the synagogue. Consequently, these two passages likewise pertained to the full message Jesus heard that day, as He continued in prayer:

The first text contained the electrifying word spoken by the Lord to Abraham: "Take now your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Genesis 22:2). The memory of this dramatic story, evoked by the "voice from heaven," beckoned Jesus to assume in His own life the sacrificial role of Isaac. Thus, in the beginning of His ministry, our Lord is already summoned to consider the tragic events that will end it. Prior to proclaiming a single word of the Gospel, Jesus receives an intimation of the Cross.

The reference to Isaac and his father in the baptismal scene is even more apparent if we consider the Greek (Septuagint) version of Genesis 22:2, where the Hebrew word for "only" (*yahid*) is changed to "beloved" (*agapetos*): "Take your beloved son, whom you love . . ."

Nothing in this Gospel story compels us to insist that Jesus, at that moment, completely grasped the meaning of His correspondence to Isaac. Although we readers are aware of Simeon's prophecy of the Cross (Luke 2:34-35), the evangelist gives no indication that our Lord knew of it. Nor has Jesus as yet encountered the homicidal hostility of those to whom the Gospel came as a threat. Consequently, it is reasonable to suppose that the full inference of His likeness to Isaac grew in the mind of Jesus as events unfolded in the course of His ministry.

It did happen, however. Our Lord, once the murderous intent of His adversaries became alarmingly apparent, recalled this Isaac theme and invited them to consider it in the setting of what they plotted to do. To these enemies, priding themselves as "Abraham's descendants," Jesus asserted, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw and was glad."

To the opponents of the Gospel, Our Lord identified Himself as the true Isaac, whose promised arrival inspired the joy---the laughter!---of ancient Abraham (cf. Genesis 17:17). It was for this assertion, and for His further claim to antecede the days of Abraham, that they "took up stones to throw at Him" (John 8:37-59).

The "voice from heaven" at Jesus' baptism evoked a second biblical text, likewise familiar to Him. It came from the Book of Isaiah and introduced the coming of God's Servant. Indeed, this passage stands at the beginning of the Servant Songs: "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold; / My soul delights in My chosen one. / I have put My Spirit upon Him" (42:1).

Although I have quoted this prophecy as it appears in the transmitted Hebrew (Massoretic) text, early Christians were familiar with another version of it, a translation closer to the words Jesus heard at His baptism. Matthew quotes the passage thus: "Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen, / My beloved [*agapetos*] in whom My soul is well pleased! / I will put My Spirit upon Him" (12:18).

Thus, even as the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, and the Father's voice addresses Him as "Son," the vocabulary of the scene recalls the Servant from the Book of Isaiah, the image which will largely determine, in due course, our Lord's understanding of His redemptive role. The Father's Son, the true Isaac, is identified as God's Servant. More and more, as the events of His life unfold---especially the conspiracy of His foes---Jesus will sound the depths of that identification. In straight lines, both images point to the Cross.

In the experience of His baptism, then, our Lord received an earnest intimation of what it finally symbolized. Luke's narrative will return to this motif in a later scene where Jesus foretells the strife and divisions attendant on the proclamation of the Gospel: "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!" (12:50; cf. Mark 10:38).

©2010 Patrick Henry Reardon

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

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

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