

February 27, 2011

Meatfare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Evidently there were several "final words" of Jesus on the cross, some recorded in Matthew and Mark, others in Luke and John. Only Luke narrates the conversation with the thief. Luke alone, likewise, records the two times Jesus cries out to God as "Father": "Father forgive them for they know not what they do," and "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:34, 46). John, an eyewitness to the Savior's death, tells how the dying Jesus committed to him the future care of his mother (John 19:26-27).

As for Matthew and Mark, they both testify that "Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit" (Matthew 27:50; cf. Mark 15:37), but neither author relates what the "loud voice" said. One justly conjectures that Matthew and Mark are alluding to Jesus' final words as they are recorded in Luke and/or John.

Let us begin, then, with the "second to last" sentence of Jesus, as transmitted by Matthew and Mark, who cite it in the Aramaic/Hebrew mixture that apparently preserves Jesus' very words: "'*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthan?*'" that is, 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' (Matthew 17:46; cf. Mark 15:34).

This anguished cry of the Savior has frequently been misunderstood in recent years. In particular, there has arisen the notion that God the Father actually did forsake His Son hanging on the Cross. In fact, Jesus' factual abandonment by his Father is sometimes understood to be the very price of salvation. Let me say that this theory presents---to say the least---a rather nasty picture of God.

Against this recent theory, the biblical evidence supports the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. For those who, like myself, follow the doctrinal guidance of those councils, it was not possible for God the Father to forsake His Son in any real---factual---sense, because the Father and the Son are of "one being" (*homoousios*). The godhead is indivisible.

The message of Jesus' cry, therefore, in no way suggests God's actual abandonment of him. This prayer conveys, not an objective, reified condition of Jesus, but, rather, his human experience of distance from God. The abandonment was psychological, not ontological. God never abandons His friends and loyal servants---much less His Son. Nonetheless, it often happens that they *feel* abandoned. And when they do, they often enough have recourse to the Book of Psalms, as Jesus does in the present case.

When Jesus expressed this painful experience in prayer, the opening line of

Psalm 22 arose to his lips---in Hebrew, *'Eli, 'Eli, lamah 'azavtani*---"My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" he could hardly have prayed this line of the Psalter unless he knew the Father was still "*my God*."

In making this prayer his own, Jesus was not expressing a sentiment unique to himself. He was, rather, identifying himself with every human being who has ever felt himself to be at a great distance from God. Perhaps this prayer best expresses what we mean when we speak of "the days of his flesh" (Hebrews 5:7). It was in this deep sense of dereliction that we perceive that "the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us" (John 1:14).

After he prayed the first line of Psalm 22, did Jesus go on to finish that psalm, silently? Christians have always suspected that this was the case.

I wonder, however, if we should stop with Psalm 22. Indeed, why would we? Let us imagine, rather, that Jesus, as he was dying, continued praying the next several psalms after Psalm 22. If he went on, quietly praying the subsequent psalms, Jesus' next words after Psalm 22 were: *Adonai ro'i, lo' 'ehsar*---"The Lord is my shepherd / I shall not want."

It is not difficult to think of Jesus going on with the other psalms in this sequence: "Lift up your heads, O you gates! / And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! / And the King of glory shall come in. . . . Show me Your ways, O Lord / Teach me Your paths. . . . The Lord is my light and my salvation / Whom shall I fear? / The Lord is the strength of my life / Of whom shall I be afraid?"

If Jesus did pray this short sequence of psalms, it took only a few minutes for him to reach Psalms 31:5, which Luke identifies as his final words on the cross: "Into Your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

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