

March 20, 2011

Second Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the young and formative years of his life, Jesus was not "working out" a religious theory. He was taking possession of his own identity. This was a process of growth, and Jesus' study of the Hebrew Scriptures was integral to that growth. He read books, and he learned from them. The works of Moses, David, Jeremiah, and the others truly contoured his mind and conscience. The mental horizon of Jesus, as we discern it in the four gospels, took shape during those long years at Nazareth, where---Luke tells us---he went to the synagogue "according to his custom."

Nonetheless, to speak of the "influence" of the Hebrew Scriptures on the mind of Jesus dramatically transcends our normal use of that expression. The Law and the Prophets shaped his self-awareness in an unparalleled way, because the Savior found in those writings his identity, vocation, and mission. His grasp of those texts---an internal understanding at the root of all Christian theology---is the very substance of Jesus' "self-regard." It was in studying the Hebrew Bible that Jesus became convinced, "I must be about the things of my Father" (Luke 2:49).

What David and Isaiah wrote, then, was not something different from who Jesus knew himself to be---and what his Father summoned him to do. Later on, in the very act of sending the Apostles out to evangelize the world, Jesus "opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). The proclamation of the Gospel was to include the incorporation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christian theology begins with---and is inseparable from---understanding the Old Testament as Jesus understood it. This is how we should understand St. Jerome's famous *mot* that "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." The only Scriptures Christ knew were the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

The Gospel of Luke indicates, moreover, that this understanding increased in Jesus. It did not happen all at once, because human understanding always takes time. Jesus took personal possession of the Hebrew Bible as he lived and ministered, as he suffered, died, and rose again. As events unfolded in his life---and particularly when he "endured such contradiction of sinners against himself" (Hebrews 12:3)---Jesus grasped ever more explicitly the meaning of God's Word. These books inwardly governed his life and destiny.

The young Jesus, as he studied in the synagogue at Nazareth, read of Isaac's burden in Genesis, the paschal lamb in Exodus, the sin offering in Leviticus, David's opprobrium in Samuel, the "pierced side" in Zechariah, the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, and the persecuted just man in the Book of Psalms. In all

these texts he found himself. They were components of who he knew he was. Thus, at age twelve, he had already begun to grasp that these themes had to do with "the things of my Father" (Luke 2:49).

I believe it is misleading, nonetheless, to inquire "when" with respect to Jesus' self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is not objective; it is an extension and defining activity of the self. One does not acquire self-identity as "information," like the study of biology or business law.

Self-knowledge is the fruit and activity of the self; it is, by definition, subjective. It is necessarily tautological---that is to say, self-awareness is its own cause. The knowledge of one's self is inseparable from being oneself.

Consequently, it is important not to "objectify" Jesus' self-awareness and then try to determine at what point---"when?"---he acquired the knowledge of his identity. Self-knowledge is intrinsic to, and an extension of, self-being. His consciousness of his identity *came from* his identity.

Self-knowledge, however, does take place a process of growth. It is historical, like all components of human consciousness. Human self-knowledge is an ongoing "event."

The gospels indicate Jesus' maturing self-knowledge at certain documented points in his life. Prominent among these were the incident in the Temple when he was 12 years old, his baptism at age 30, the miracle at Cana, and, perhaps a year or so later, the dramatic awareness of his redemptive destiny. This last was the resolve of that internal moment when "*he began* to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly (Mark 8:31-32).

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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