

June 5, 2011

The Sunday After the Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

From Jerome to Luther and on to modern times, translators of Holy Scripture have lamented the difficulty of their task. It would not surprise me to learn, indeed, that even the great Alexandrian Seventy---if only we had their diaries and private correspondence---also recorded complaints on this point.

A major problem---especially acute when the "receiving" language embodies a culture not yet shaped by the Bible---comes from the wealth of individual biblical expressions that have no entire equivalence in other tongues.

Two such words, surely, are the noun *pistis* and the verb *pistevo*. The former is normally translated "faith" or "loyalty," but in certain settings it also means "trust." The verb, depending on the idiomatic context, can be rendered "to believe," "to trust," and "to maintain loyalty."

Let us observe, however, that the difficulty arises only with respect to translation; in Greek itself, both the verb and the noun always contain all those meanings! The translator, guided mainly by the perceived context, is almost never able to convey the full sense.

I mention a complex example that illustrates the problem: Paul writes to the Colossians, "we heard of your faith [*pistis*] in Christ Jesus and of the love [*agape*] which you have unto all the saints" (1:4). Now, since the meaning of this text seems perfectly plain, where is the problem?

The problem, as I see it, does not arise until we compare this verse to another verse Paul wrote---perhaps just a few days later---in the Epistle to the Ephesians. For the purpose of introducing this discussion, I begin with the wording found in the New King James Version: "I heard of your faith [*pistis*] in the Lord Jesus and your love [*agape*] for all the saints" (1:15). At first, this seems to correspond exactly to the sense of Colossians 1:4.

Ah, but here is the rub: this translation of Ephesians rests on a doubtful reading. According to the earliest evidence---the Chester Beatty papyrus (46), the Codex Sinaiticus, the Codex Vaticanus, the Boharic Coptic, and Origen---the proper reading of Ephesians 1:15 does not contain the word "love." Its inclusion in other manuscripts seems to come from the influence of the text in Colossians. That is to say, Ephesians was "corrected" to make it conform to Colossians, and the translator was delivered from a difficulty.

If the earlier sources are right on this particular, Ephesians 1:15 originally read, "I heard of your *pistis* in the Lord Jesus and unto all the saints." Now, poor beleaguered translator, how are you going to render *pistis*? "Faith"? Yes, I think, "faith," but "faith" in what sense---as belief, as trust, or as loyalty?

You see, this really is a problem of translation, because the Greek text itself is perfectly clear. It says *pistis*, a word that conveys all these senses at once, with no syntactical problem. "Faith in the Lord Jesus" means belief in Jesus' lordship, trust in Jesus' protection, and loyalty to Jesus' person. "Faith . . . unto all the saints" especially conveys the sense of fidelity to the other Christians. In the context of Ephesians, all these ideas are contained in a single word, and the complexity consists in the sheer richness of that word.

If I seem overly concerned with this matter, let me confess the reason: For some time, it seems to me, there has prevailed among various Christians a lopsided emphasis on a single aspect of faith---faith as trust in God. Accordingly, "I believe [*pistevo*] in one God" means, "I place my trust and confidence in one God."

Not for a minute, of course, do I challenge that sense of the expression. Something is still missing, nonetheless: I think this line of the Creed means, not only "I *have* faith in one God," but also, "I keep faith unto one God," "I am loyal to one God." Indeed, the Creed's preposition here, *eis*, which I have translated as "unto," is identical to the text in Ephesians 1:15, "faith *unto* all the saints."

Christian faith, that is to say, is not only trust in God; it is also fidelity to God. It is not only a divine gift (*Gabe*); it is also a human task (*Aufgabe*). Faith is entirely reciprocal, in that we both trust in---and remain faithful to---God's promise of fidelity to us. Thus, the declarative "*I am*" is followed by the corresponding imperative "*thou shalt not*."

"I believe" in one God means I abandon all other gods and cling to this one God only, who has revealed Himself in both redemption and covenant.

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