

August 21, 2011

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of the major ideas---and perhaps the culminating idea---in the second chapter of Ephesians is the unity of gentiles with Jews to form a single people for God. These two, formerly estranged, have been united, Paul says, through the blood of Christ:

"He himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation . . . that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And he came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near" (2:14-17).

When Paul describes when Paul speaks of Jews and non-Jews outside outside of Christ, however, he concedes little advantage to the Jew over the non-Jew. The opening verses of Ephesians may serve as an example. First, Paul tells the gentiles, "*And you* [He brought to life], who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked . . ." Next, using the first person plural, he speaks of the Jews: "*and we* all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of thoughts, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others" (2:1-3). Here, the emphasis on "and you" and "and we" is not mine; it is dictated in the word order of the Greek text. Both *you* and *we*, says Paul, are in very bad shape, apart from what God has wrought for both of us in Christ.

Although the Jews enjoyed the blessings of the Torah, the covenant, and the divine oracles, the Apostle argues, their moral failures are just as serious as those of the gentiles. They both live "according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience."

We recognize here a thesis Paul already argued in the Epistle to the Romans: Because both are descendents of fallen Adam, neither Jew nor gentile may boast, inasmuch as "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Paul's evidence of the moral failure of the gentiles is enumerated in his distressing catalogue of social evils in Romans 1:18-32. It is noteworthy, however, that he provides no equivalent list of sins on the part of the Jews. For the latter he appeals only to the testimony of his own conscience. Paul, himself, is the sinful Jews. This idea is found in both Romans and Ephesians.

So what, exactly, were Paul's moral failures? In what consisted those fleshly

passions operative in his life prior to his encounter with the risen Jesus?

Luke, his fellow missionary, portrays them vividly: "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2). What Luke calls "breathing threats and murder" corresponds very closely to what Paul describes as "fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of thoughts."

Prior to meeting Jesus on the way to Damascus, the future Apostle, who imagined himself a righteous man, was very much in the grip of "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience." That is to say, if the moral life of the Jews was no better than that of the gentiles, it was because Paul knew himself to represent what was worst in the Jews.

In his own life, Paul knew it was the Torah that had aggravated his corrupt spiritual condition. His zeal had led him to offend God. His passion on behalf of the Torah was a carnal passion, as his own biography bore witness: "I am indeed a Jew . . . taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:3-4).

Of the Torah Paul asks, "Did that which is good, then, become death to me?" And he answers, "Certainly not! But sin, that it might be shown to be sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful" (Romans 7:13-14). The Torah, which is most certainly good, became for Paul the occasion of his worst sins. Not only had the observance of the Torah been unable to justify Paul; it also became the instrument of his greater fall. "Sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived and thereby killed me" (7:11).

In particular, Paul's very pursuit of the Torah led him, in his sinfulness, to participate in the conspiracy to murder Stephan. Praying in the Temple, in a state of trance, he told the Lord, "'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, consenting, and guarding the clothes of those who killed him" (Acts 22:19-20).

The Torah's inability to confer justification was not a theory Paul dreamed up. He knew it from experience- from the testimony of conscience. A bitter memory was to salt that conscience for the rest of Paul's life: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man" (1 Timothy 1:13; cf. Acts 26:9-11; 1 Corinthians 15:9).

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