

December 4, 2011

Third Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Jews at the time of Jesus---particularly those represented by the Pharisees---looked forward to a resurrection from the dead as part of God's final judgment of history. The early Christians believed the Resurrection of Jesus was a vindication of that hope. Thus, at one of his trials Paul declared, "I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" (Acts 23:6; cf. 24:15, 21; 26:6-8).

Because the Resurrection of Christ was seen to vindicate the Jewish expectation of a general resurrection, it served as the basis of Christian hope. In our extant literature the earliest testimony to this thesis comes from about A. D. 50, when Paul wrote to the new congregation at Thessaloniki, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Paul wrote in similar terms to the brethren at Philippi: "We also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20-21). To the congregation at Corinth, he wrote, likewise, "But now Christ, risen from the dead, has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:20-22).

The hope of the early Christians, therefore, was very different from the hope entertained by many of their contemporaries, particularly the disciples of Plato. These latter looked forward to a spiritual afterlife, following the death of the body. The more fervent among them longed to be set free from the body, as from a garment no longer needed. Theirs was an immaterial hope.

Not so the Christians. Paul declared, "For we know that if our earthly house of skin is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, everlasting in the heavens. For at the present we groan, earnestly longing to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven---if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked! For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Corinthians 5:1-4).

The object of Paul's hope was not to be stripped naked---to become an immaterial spirit---but, rather, to become "further clothed" (*ependynasthai*). In the resurrection, that is to say, "what is sown in corruption is raised in incorruption. Sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. Sown in weakness, it is raised in power" (1 Corinthians 15:42-43).

Those possessed of such a hope, Paul believed, should manifest it in their lives--even in their lifestyle. They should not mourn, for example, "as others who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Most of all, they must eschew the sort of dissipation that is rooted in despair. Paul found an illustration of this in the Book of Isaiah. That eighth century prophet, describing the despondency that descended on the citizens of Jerusalem as they faced a siege of the Assyrian army, quoted them as saying, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isaiah 22:13).

Paul, who saw signs of this despair in the fun-loving attitude of some of the Corinthians (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:21-22; 11:20-22), quoted this verse of Isaiah by way of warning. It was no wonder, the Apostle reasoned, that these Christians lived such worldly lives, if they had lost hope in the coming resurrection (15:12; cf. Luke 12:19).

The word "resurrection," in short, meant more than an assent to an event in the past; it conveyed also a hope for something in the future. Belief or unbelief in the Resurrection of Christ was not a purely speculative decision; it was weighted with practical consequences regarding how the believer, or unbeliever, conducted his life.

Unbelief induced a life of dissipation born of despair, the sort of feasting described by Herodotus as a celebration of death itself: "Drink and have fun--- *pine te kai terpev*---for you will be dying like this" (*Histories* 2:78). Those who professed faith in the Resurrection of Christ, Paul was convinced, would not live this way. Their manner of life would be characterized by a patience and discipline born of hope.

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