

December 11, 2011

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In Luke's account of the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple, it is Jesus himself who makes the final comment (Luke 2:49), which is a question: "Did you not know that I must be" Be *what*? Translators are not agreed about the question's final phrase: *en tois tou Patros mou*. Translated literally, it means "in the things of my Father."

The traditional Latin adheres tightly to this plain sense: *in his quae Patris mei sunt*---"in these things that are my Father's." Because this is somewhat awkward English, however, older versions adopted a more graceful paraphrase: "about my Father's business" (the Douay-Rheims and the King James).

Although this rendering is perfectly clear and corresponds accurately to the original, a few recent translations take the Greek expression in a more idiomatic sense. For instance, the New International Version renders it "Didn't you know I had to be *in my Father's house*?"

This translation is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first. The Greek neuter plural *ta* ("the things") can, in some contexts, refer to a home. For instance, when the Fourth Gospel says---of the Beloved Disciple and Jesus' mother---"this disciple took her *eis ta idia*," the King James sensibly translates the final phrase as "unto his own home."

In the question of the boy Jesus to his mother, then, is the same Greek idiom in play? It is not difficult to make that argument, given the importance of the Temple---God's house---in Luke's theology. Luke's gospel, after all, both begins (1:22) and ends (24:53) in the Temple. The Temple serves as the place of culmination in both Luke's birth narrative (2:22-27) and his temptation account (4:9).

It could well be, then, that Luke's *en tois tou Patros mou* signifies "in my Father's house." If this is the case, the burden of Jesus' question is, "I am here in my Father's house. You should have known where to find me."

Nonetheless, I do not believe this is the correct meaning of the text. When Mary complained to Jesus, "Your father and I have sought You anxiously," he did not ask why they sought him elsewhere. He asked why they looked for him at all: "Why were you searching for me?"

As I see it, the older translations had it right: "Did you not know that I must be *about my Father's business*?" That is to say, I believe Jesus' reference in this passage was not to the place where he was found but to the activity in which

he was engaged---namely, "about my Father's business."

In what sense was the 12-year-old Jesus, during those three days in the Temple, concerned with "the things" of his Father?

Luke provides the answer, surely, when he describes Jesus in the Temple as "sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions" (2:46). That is to say, he was engaged in the studious pursuit of the Holy Scriptures. That is what rabbis do, when they gather to ask questions.

In Luke's account of his subsequent ministry, indeed, the pursuit of biblical understanding was a dominant preoccupation of Jesus. According to Luke, he was engrossed with the meaning of Sacred Scripture from the very beginning of his preaching (4:16-21) all the way to his final missionary mandate to the Church (24:44-48).

The story of the boy Jesus in the Temple contains the first of several "discussions" about the biblical material as it pertained to his life and ministry. Another is found in Luke's account of the Transfiguration, in which Moses and Elijah---the Law and the Prophets---"appeared in glory and spoke of his *exodos* which he was about to fulfill at Jerusalem" (9:31).

In this scene Moses and Elijah are portrayed as discussing the fulfillment (*pleroun*) of Holy Scripture. Luke's more attentive readers will wonder if Jesus was, once again, "both listening to them and asking them questions."

Finally, corresponding to that biblical discussion near the beginning of Luke comes the scene, near the end, in which Jesus discourses about the meaning Scripture with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (24:13-27). In this case, too, the discussion contains the posing of questions (24: 17, 18, 19, 26). In these two travelers to Emmaus, it is not difficult to discern a symbolic correspondence to the earlier appearance of Moses and Elijah.

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