

March 4, 2012

First Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Theology should always consider together two ideas the Bible never puts asunder: the future resurrection of the righteous and the present grace that renders them righteous. That is to say, there is a living continuity between a believer's current state in Christ and the hope he cherishes of finally rising in Christ. These are not two separable things.

The triumphant Lord, through the dynamism of his Resurrection, remains the source of ongoing life for those who cling to him in faith. The power of the Resurrection is already available to those in whom Christ abides by grace

This continuity is not theoretical; it is, rather, a reality discernible in Christian experience. The Apostle Paul, as he sat in his Palatine prison cell, described the existential force of the experience: "I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord . . . that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, and so, by whatever means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:8-11).

Whereas in Philippians the relationship between man's present righteousness and his future resurrection is described in dynamic terms of personal struggle, in Romans it is portrayed as the abiding action of the Holy Spirit: "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11). Here there is perfect continuity between the present power and the promised resurrection.

Paul places the locus of this continuity in the believer's body. That is to say, the Christian's very body is where the Holy Spirit abides-that same Spirit who will, in due course, raise that body from the dead: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body, which is God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Thus, the believer's body is the place where mortality is at war with the Spirit-conferred power of the risen Christ. Probably nowhere did Paul express himself so graphically on this conflict than in Second Corinthians, the very theme of which is, "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

When he wrote this second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul seems to have been going through a particularly rough patch, in which he became more keenly aware of his mortality. He was feeling especially vulnerable to physical and psychological attack. To counter this assault by the forces of death, he strengthened himself by fixing his mind on the power of the Lord's Resurrection in his life: "For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (4:11).

During this time Paul felt an intense longing to experience, at last, the immortality God had placed in his redeemed flesh: "For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee" (5:4-5).

The Christian's body Paul likened to a clay vessel, which carries within it the energy of the Lord's Resurrection: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (4:7). In the concrete experience of his mortality, the believer discerns the occasion of union with the death of Jesus, but this every experience foretells the resurrection to come. Paul was certain that we are "always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (4:10).

Christ is not content to overcome sin in our lives. He has in mind also to conquer, in our flesh, the same force of death that he trampled down in his Resurrection. Even as he forgives our sins, he gives us the Holy Spirit as the abiding guarantor of our rising again. The two things must always be considered together; each is part of the same salvation.

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