

March 11, 2012

St. Gregory the Dialogist

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In Jesus' inaugural sermon, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, our Lord quotes the Book of Isaiah to describe his own ministry. We are all familiar with the text. I quote the King James translation, which has the merit of being rather literal: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4:18).

I direct attention to that last phrase: "to set at liberty them that are bruised." The Greek participial form translated as "them that are bruised" comes from the verb *thravo*, which generally means to afflict or to break.

At first glance, this expression, "to set at liberty them that are bruised," may seem surprising, because "setting at liberty" appears not to be what one normally does with respect to a bruise. If a moving automobile, for example, strikes me and they take my injured body to the emergency room, the attending physician may provide an ointment for my bruises. I suspect he would be surprised, however, if I asked him, please, to set me "at liberty" from those bruises. In other words, "setting at liberty" is not normally thought of as a cure for bruises. We think of bruises---or breaks, for that matter---as injuries to be healed. In respect of these things we employ the language of therapy, not that of liberation.

I am scarcely the first reader to observe this apparent incongruity in the biblical text. Indeed, some copyists of the New Testament changed the verb in this verse from "to set at liberty" to "heal," *isasthasthai*. This textual change is testimony to the discomfort some ancient biblical copyists found in the wording of the verse.

However, the obvious propriety displayed in this textual variant is a very strong argument against its authenticity. That is to say, it is easy to explain why a copyist might change the verb from "set at liberty" to "heal": it is nearly impossible to explain why a copyist would change "heal" to "set at liberty." In this case, the *textus receptus* must represent the original.

If we simply accept what the received text actually says---"to set at liberty them that are bruised"---we are left with an exegetical problem: What does it mean? In what sense is the language of liberty to be applied to bruises? Is there some way in which our bruises hold us captive?

I think most of us suspect the answer to this. Many of us---perhaps nearly all of us---carry bruises from injuries we suffered at some earlier period of our lives. Some folks carry bruises from their very childhood. Many of us are still coping with injuries inflicted on us, whether by the circumstances in which we were raised, or from destructive experiences in school, or failed romantic adventures when we were younger, or other abiding injuries to our memory, or the raw meanness and cruelty of people it has been our misfortune to know.

Very few of us, one suspects, have completely escaped all injuries like these. Practically everyone carries some bruise in his heart. People in our lives have hurt us, and we still suffer from those hurts. It may be the case that such injuries still cause us---spiritually---to limp. The symptoms are obvious. For example, we find that sometimes our reactions to people---or to life in general---are abnormal, simply because we still feel a subterranean pain in some part of our souls. Our minds and hearts are blighted with scar tissue.

Now it is the claim of Christ our Lord that he came "to set at liberty them that are bruised." Let me suggest that this attainment of liberty is the work of prayer. It is imperative that believers work hard to bring to the attention of Christ-i--in prayer---the myriad bruises that they carry around within themselves. They must let the Physician see and examine the sundry ways---deep inside themselves---in which they still hurt. It is he who sets the bruised at liberty.

The work involved here is more than simple healing. It also involved "letting go" of injuries we don't need to carry any more. They are burdens from which Christ our Lord wants to set us free. I suspect this as a proper matter of concern during the holy season of Lent, during which believers are called to a greater introspection, a keener analysis of motives, and a more cautious assessment of all things spiritual.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php