

**April 22, 2012**

Saint Thomas Sunday

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

The following lines are excerpted from a sermon I delivered this past Bright Thursday in the chapel of Asbury Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky:

We may start by observing that two things happen in the Book of Psalms:

First, God is spoken *about*. This is already the case in the first two psalms, during the course of which He is never directly addressed. God is not invoked at all until Psalm 3. Indeed, many lines of the Psalter are statements about God and the things of God.

Second, in many places in the Psalter, God is spoken *to*. This dominating feature of prayer is what makes the Book of Psalms unique in the Bible's Wisdom literature.

These two aspects of the Psalter correspond to the double task of Christian theology: to speak *to* God and to speak *about* God----prayer, that is to say, and proclamation.

Thus, according to the Apostle Paul, the Holy Spirit prompts two formal declarations from the Christian believer. One of these is a thesis: "Jesus is Lord!" The other is a prayer: "Abba, Father!"

In these two declarations we recognize the creedal foundation of the Christian Church: "I believe in one God, the Father almighty . . . I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ." This is the substance of the Holy Spirit's testimony to the believing conscience: "Abba, Father" and "Jesus is Lord." The Holy Spirit prompts us to speak *about* God and to speak *to* God. And to assist us in this double task, the Holy Spirit has given us the Book of Psalms.

Let us take an example of a psalm giving shape to early Christology. It is Psalm 8, in which the psalmist inquires of the Lord, "What is man that You are mindful of him, / And the son of man that You visit him? / For You have made him a little lower than the angels, / And You have crowned him with glory and honor. / You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; / You have put all things under his feet."

Although the psalmist wants to know, "What is man?"---*ma henosh*---today I

am more interested in knowing *mi henosh*, "Who is the man? Who is this "son of man" that God visits? He is surely identical to the "man" mentioned in the very first line of the Psalter: *'ashrei ha'ish 'asher lo halak ba'atsat resha'im*--- "the blessings of the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly."

This is "the man"---*ha'ish* or *'ish*, not *ha'adam*. That is to say, we are talking about a "male," not simply a "human being." This is the *man* whom God crowns with glory and honor, the son of man to whom is given all authority in heaven and on earth, the man under whose feet God subjects all things.

This is the "man" introduced in the opening line of the Book of Psalms. The entire subject matter of the Psalter is this "man." Identifying this man is the key to the understanding of the Psalms. It is important to recognize him, because, it is in this man's name that we are to pray the Psalms.

The early Christians were unanimous in their identification of this man, but the most detailed treatment of Psalm 8 is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Somewhere somebody testified [*diemartyresato de pou tis*] 'What is man that You are mindful of him, / Or the son of man that You take care of him? / You have made him a little lower than the angels; / You have crowned him with glory and honor, / And set him over the works of Your hands. / You have put all things in subjection under his feet'"(Hebrews 2:6-8).

The author of Hebrews follows this quotation from Psalm 8 by identifying the "man" of whom it speaks: "For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But *we see Jesus*, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for every person" (2:8-9).

This is the Christian summary: "We see Jesus." Jesus is the man about whom the Book of Psalms is concerned, and, when we pray the Psalms, we do so by reason of our incorporation into Jesus. We pray the Psalms with understanding, because---in the expression of the Apostle Paul---we are "in Christ." All the psalms proclaim, "Jesus is Lord!" And when Christians pray the Psalms, their prayer may be summarized as "Abba, Father."

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