

May 6, 2012

Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

This is an excerpt from the sermon preached at All Saints' Orthodox Church on April 22:

In considering the Resurrection and the Christian moral life, perhaps we should begin by observing how frequently the New Testament uses the word "Therefore" in connection with Christian behavior. I will limit comments today to a single book, the First Epistle of the Apostle Peter.

This book, which is a sort of post-Baptismal catechesis, begins with the Resurrection of Jesus. Peter writes: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you."

Peter continues in this vein for a few more verses and then, abruptly, declares: "*Therefore*, gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children."

The critical word here---the link word---is the one we are most likely to miss: the word "therefore." This word serves as the pivot in Peter's moral argument. The Resurrection of Jesus is the moral premise; the obligation of holiness is the moral inference of that premise.

Thus, Peter goes on to give us a moral exhortation: ". . . not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct."

Peter is not finished, however. The second chapter of this epistle begins: "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious."

Notice the structure of Peter's moral argument. He does not appeal to the commandments to prove that malice is wrong. He does demonstrate the evil of deceit, hypocrisy, and envy by citing the mandates of the Pentateuch. Rather,

we eschew malice, because God, "according to His abundant mercy, has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." We lay aside deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and sins of the tongue, because the Father has called us "to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven."

Even the Christian political life pivots on a "therefore." Just a few verses later, Peter writes, "*Therefore* submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good."

In other words, the Resurrection of Christ, by which God has begotten us to a living hope, determines even our relationship to the civil government. We vote, we obey traffic laws, and we pay taxes, because Christ rose from the dead and lives among us. Everything we do in this world, we do because Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and giving life to those in the tomb.

Because we are blood-bought Christians risen with Christ, we have a new pattern of life. Such is the meaning of the Christian "therefore." In the fourth chapter of this same epistle Peter writes, "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God."

That is to say, all Christian moral imperative is founded on a new component in human experience---namely, the power of the Resurrection and the presence of the risen Christ among us. The reason we do not engage our physical lusts is the reality of the risen Christ in our very bodies.

Why do we patiently endure provocation? For what reason do we refuse to retaliate when we are insulted? It is because the Father of Jesus Christ has sanctified us "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." "*Therefore*," says Peter, "humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." That one word, "therefore," is the pivot and hinge of the Christian life.

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