

May 26, 2013

Sunday of the Man Born Blind

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Sprinkled Blood

In First Peter the sufferings and death of Jesus serve to bolster a pervasive exhortation to Christian patience, service, and longsuffering, following the example given in the Lord's Passion. This moral preoccupation with patience in affliction reflects the hostile environment in which Peter's Christians were obliged to live, despised outcasts surrounded by enmity, cruelty, and injustice. Peter holds before the minds of these Christians the example conveyed in Christ's suffering and death. The author's intention is succinctly put: "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example" (2:21).

This moral and exhortatory intention, however, does not mean that Christ's sufferings and death served only an exemplary purpose. On the contrary, Peter knew—and knew that the Savior knew—that his suffering and death pertained to the work of Atonement. Indeed, within the opening verses of this epistle, Peter speaks of the "sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (1:2).

The expression "sprinkling of the blood" comes from a cultic setting described in Exodus, where Moses stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and, by way of sealing Israel's resolve to observe the Law, "took the Book of the Covenant and read unto the ears of the people. And they said, 'All that the Lord said we shall do, and we will obey.' Moses, taking the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words'" (Exodus 24:7-8).

This "blood of the covenant" came from the young bulls sacrificed as fellowship offerings to the Lord. It is sprinkled on the Israelite men in response to their vow to do and obey the precepts of the Law. Moses' action makes their vow a kind of "blood oath," in which their resolve receives a special consecration.

St. Peter extends the significance of this rite to the Christians, those "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit." They, too, Peter declares, are summoned to a covenant service, which is likewise

consecrated in blood: “unto obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” Christians have been chosen for this very purpose: to enter into a covenantal relationship of obedience to the God who redeemed them by the blood of Christ.

Given the importance of Baptism in this epistle, it appears likely that Peter has the baptismal covenant in mind here. Indeed, this impression is bolstered by the blessing in the next sentence: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3).

Let me suggest, however, that—in addition to Exodus 24—Peter may also be referring to Exodus 12, where it is prescribed that the blood of the paschal lamb should be placed on the doorposts of the Israelites’ homes to spare their families from the terrible tenth plague of Egypt. Although it is not clear that the Passover blood was sprinkled, the sense of the passage is close enough to merit consideration here.

Whereas the sprinkled blood in Exodus 24 was that of sacrificed bulls, Peter—when he speaks of the atoning blood of Christ—is more disposed to think of a sacrificed lamb. Thus, he declares, just a bit later, that we have been redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb with neither blemish nor stain” (1 Peter 1:19).

The description of this lamb, moreover, indicates an even larger conflation of Old Testament texts in Peter’s mind. Although Exodus did not prescribe that the paschal lamb be without blemish, such a requirement did apply to the lambs offered in the daily and monthly sacrifices (Numbers 28:3, 11), as well as for the feast of Sukkoth (29:17).

Peter seems implicitly to have all those sacrifices in mind. All of them, each in its own way, were symbolic and prophetic of the unique sacrifice whereby the Lamb of God took away the sins of the world. It made no difference, either to Peter or any other Christian, that the Israel’s paschal lamb was not a sin offering. The Paschal Lamb of Christians most certainly was a sin offering—and a grain offering, and a dedication offering, and a holocaust, and so forth. He fulfilled all the sacrifices required of God’s People.

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