

February 16, 2014

The Second Sunday of the Triodion

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In Romans 11 Paul's argument moves in stages. First, he says, Israel's rejection of the Messiah was not complete, inasmuch as many Jews—himself mentioned first—gladly received Jesus and became a remnant, the original nucleus of the Church. Comparing this remnant to the three thousand faithful of whom Elijah learned in a revelation on Mount Horeb, Paul writes,

I say then, has God cast away His people? Perish the thought! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. . . . Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

Paul was no more alone than Elijah had been. God had not abandoned Israel in the days of old; He will not abandon Israel now, because "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable."

The irrevocable nature of God's election leads to Paul's second consideration; namely, that the falling away of Israel is only temporary. God has future plans for Israel. For the moment, however, Israel is acting in blindness, which is the source of Paul's sadness.

He observes, moreover, that Israel's blindness at the present time is hardly unique. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of prior examples, and the prophets—he cites Isaiah and David—commented on the theme.

That is to say, Israel's current defection has had no shortage of precedents in the past, and if God remained faithful to Israel in former times, He surely remains faithful to Israel now and will manifest that fidelity in days to come. The course of history, Paul argues, will prove the Jews still to be God's elect and predestined people.

Paul's comments on the irrevocable nature of God's fidelity to Israel prompt two further considerations:

First, in Paul's entire treatment of election and predestination, these terms refer to social entities—not individuals. Neither in Romans nor elsewhere does Paul show any concern for individual predestination. It is a line of thought simply outside his scope of interest, and none of his statements on the subject of predestination and election are relevant to such a concern. In Romans 11, it is always a matter of the chosen "people," not a collection of chosen individuals.

Election and predestination in Paul, then, are themes pertinent to ecclesiology, not to individual salvation. Romans does not teach that Pharaoh and Esau were damned; they may have been, but that is not the point. Paul speaks of them by way of symbolism, not as individual persons. Pharaoh and Esau are not "vessels of election," inasmuch as God's choice did not fall on them as ministers of grace. He used them—and their resistant choices—as patches of friction, rather, as stepping stones, to further His salvific purposes.

Second, "Israel" in these verses is a biological/religious term, not a political designation. Consequently, it is a serious distortion of biblical prophecy to suggest that the modern State of Israel is the intended beneficiary of God's blessings; God's promises to Abraham are fulfilled in the Gospel and the Church, not in a resolution of the United Nations. Holy Scripture contains no references to the modern state of Israel, and God will judge its behavior by the same moral criteria as any other political entity.

After his discussion of the "remnant," Paul turns to the metaphor of the olive tree in order to illustrate how it is that non-Jews find themselves as branches on the ancient plant of Israel. That is to say, Paul now inquires, how is it true that "Abraham is the father of us all?"

The failure of most Jews to recognize Jesus as the Messiah is described by Paul as the lopping off of branches from the olive tree of Israel, and the entry of the Gentiles into the Christian Church he portrays as an engrafting of alien branches into the earlier stock. The tree, however, remains the same. The ancient calling of the Israelites has not been abrogated; it remains the core root of the plant.

Christians, then, must not be boasters and smart alecks. After all, it was by grace through faith that they were engrafted; they had done nothing to deserve it. Divine grace should be received with reverence, not with smug self-satisfaction. Heaven help the Christian who contemns the Jew.

©2014 Patrick Henry Reardon

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

phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

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