

March 30, 2014
Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
Jesus Praying the Psalms

In my next book, which I (along with my publisher) hope will be finished soon, I will argue that Jesus learned the meaning of the biblical prophecies in his life of prayerful intimacy with the Father.

The prayer of Christ is inseparable from the being of Christ. In the mind of Christ the eternal reciprocity between the Father and the Son assumes the contour and quality of human consciousness; it transfigures the mind, the will, the memory, the imagination, and the freedom of Jesus. Here, in this consciousness, a human being knows himself to be God's eternal Son, sent to earth for the eternal Salvation of those to whom he chose to become a brother. The consubstantial Son, who eternally responds in love to the Father's generation, assumed our humanity, precisely in order to continue, in human prayer, the gift of himself—the response of himself—to the Father, but now on our behalf.

The proper place to learn the meaning of the Atonement is the human soul of Christ, in his continuous self-giving prayer to the Father. Christians must not approach the mystery of Salvation from the outside. Its meaning is first to be sought in Jesus' personal relationship to his Father, a relationship inseparable from his prayer. What Salvation really means is what it means to Jesus. And what it means to Jesus is not a theory; it is his full relationship to the Father. If we want to grasp what the Passion meant to Jesus—and this is what it really meant, after all—we need to go to what Holy Scripture tells us of the prayer of Jesus.

This is not difficult to do, for the simple reason that Holy Scripture tells us so very much about it. The sheer mass of the information is staggering. In fact, we have in hand a whole collection of prayers in which we listen to the very voice of Christ speaking to his Father. In this collection of prayers we discern his faith, his hope, his love, his obedient resolve, the anguish of his mind and the torments of his body, his sentiments, his disappointments, and his praise.

This collection of prayers is called the Book of Psalms. Let us place in our minds, once and for all, the following conviction: the Psalms were inspired and written down so that Christ could pray them. The Psalms disclose the thoughts, desires, and sentiments of the Messiah and Suffering Servant as he communes with his Father.

To pray the Psalms in and with Christ, then, is to know the mystery of Salvation from the inside. No soteriological theories, no speculations; indeed, no outside comments at all. What we have in the Psalms is the “mind of Christ.” The psalms are the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Christ in prayer form.

We hold this to be true on the testimony of our earliest extant exegete of the Psalms, the Apostle Paul, who places on the lips of Jesus the following line of prayer: “The reproaches of those who reproached You have fallen on me.” The “You” here is God the Father, and the “me” is Christ praying during his Passion. Paul’s understated comment is, “even Christ did not please himself.” We observe that Paul presumed that the Roman Christians, in a church he had not yet visited, understood Psalm 68 (Hebrew 69) to be a prayer of Jesus himself (Romans 15:3).

In understanding the psalm this way, Paul was at one with the Christians of his day, those saints to whom the word of truth was first conveyed. The Evangelist John, for instance, traces a neighboring line of this psalm to the lips of Christ: “Zeal for Your house has consumed me” (John 2:17). In this psalm we enter into the very heart of Christ in the experience of his Passion: “Deliver me from those that hate me, and from the depths of the waters. Let not the flood of water submerge me, nor the depth swallow me down, nor the mouth of the pit close over me.”

To pray these lines in and with Christ is to enter into his intimate communion with the Father. This Christ, who says to his Father, “My heart waited for contempt and misery; I hoped for someone to share my sorrow, but there was no one; someone to console me, but I found none,” also inquires of his disciples, “Could you not watch with me one hour?” (Matt. 26:40)

Each Evangelist records that Jesus was given vinegar at the crucifixion. The psalm, expressing his feelings from the inside, says, “And for my food they laid out gall, and for my drink they gave me vinegar.”

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