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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.40 No.18

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

03/29/09

THE LOGIC OF LENT - 5

On this second-last Sunday in Lent, known as Passion Sunday, the pilgrimage of Lent enters into the mystery of Christ's passion and death. We begin with the collect. Despite its lack of explicit reference to the passion, it introduces the fundamental question of the season: how God will "look mercifully on his people" with the result that by his great goodness they may be "governed and preserved evermore." In the Latin original, "people" is familia, the people united to God in his covenant; "govern and preserve" are verbs used to describe a shepherd's care for his flock. (In Latin, "the Lord is my shepherd" is Dominus regit me, literally 'the Lord rules me'.)

The reason why this is a question is indicated in the ancient Old Testament lesson: the call of Jeremiah (chapter 1:1-19), like Moses a prophet sent by God to announce his judgments, but this time not against Pharaoh, but against the priests, princes, and people of Jerusalem, who have broken the covenant God established with them by Moses. Only through suffering the judgments for breaking the covenant can Israel hope to return to the Lord's favour. Therefore, like Moses, Jeremiah is warned to expect hostility: "they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee". Jeremiah is the epitome of the servant of the Lord, who suffers for his faithfulness to the covenant.

This warning of the prophet's rejection and deliverance prepares us to read the painful controversy between Jesus and the Jews in today's (rather difficult) gospel lesson (John 8:46-end). The one who cast out demons is himself accused of having a devil. The heart of the controversy is the person and authority of Jesus, his right to speak as he does, as a prophet declaring the word of God without compromise. All the great themes of his passion are already present – the sinless obedience of his humanity with which he honours the Father in all that he speaks and does, and the unbelieving rejection with which his opponents dishonour him, and expose their own sin, in refusing to hear his word. His word forces a division, which God himself will adjudicate. "There is one that seeketh and judgeth."

The controversy comes down to the question whether or not he has the right to say "before Abraham was, I am." The reference to the divine name ("I AM") is an implicit claim to deity (cf. Exodus 3:14): the Jews reject the claim as blasphemy, worth of death, and try to lynch Jesus: an impulse which will eventually be realized at the cross.

God's own covenant people is caught in disastrous opposition to the God whose favour is the very basis of their welfare. How can there be a happy ending to this contradiction? The answer is given in the epistle lesson (Hebrews 9:11-15). If the gospel lesson shows us Jesus' passion in light of his office as prophet, as an act of judgment whose outcome turns on his right to speak the word of God, the epistle lesson shows us his death as an act of a priest (and victim), offering his own sinless humanity as the perfect sacrifice for sin, and accomplishing "once for all" in his death on the cross that which the countless sacrifices offered in the Temple could never accomplish: the cleansing of the conscience, the remission of sins. In entering by his death into the "holy place" of God's presence on our behalf, and obtaining an "eternal redemption for us", Christ is manifest as the Mediator of the "new covenant" foretold by Jeremiah (31:31-34), a covenant uniting sinful man and a holy God in holy fellowship.

It was Saint Anselm (d.1109), Italian archbishop of Canterbury, who drew together the scriptural themes juxtaposed in today's lessons, and articulated what remains the most compelling theological account of the atonement. As Anselm presented the doctrine, the two natures of Christ, divine and human, each contribute something essential to his atoning death. As sinless Man, he is able to die, and therein offer God the sacrifice that sin requires. As God, the sacrifice he offered was of infinite worth, and can thereby make satisfaction for "the sins of the whole world".

Since the Jews represent the entire human race in their rejection of Christ, his death is our judgment; our exposure as grievous offenders against divine Majesty. Our hope for forgiveness, therefore, lies entirely in his mercy: with nothing to offer of our own that God will accept, we must plead before God the merits of his sacrifice, we must claim its benefits for ourselves, in repentance and faith.

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