

Their Souls Did Magnify the Lord (3/5)

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Catherine: Yesterday and Monday, we spent some time showing how the Epistle of I Peter tapped into some of the major themes of the Old Testament. We stressed the parallel between the new Christian's journey—really, the whole church's journey—from the bondage to sin to the kingdom which Christ opened by his death and resurrection. We also showed how the Suffering Servant, first sketched in Isaiah 52-53, took fuller shape and was lived out in the Cross of Christ, and how I Peter applies this also to those early Christians to whom the letter is sent, showing that they should not be at all surprised that they may be called to suffer, following in the footsteps of Jesus.

We may find this form of Biblical interpretation strange—in a taking an event in Israel's history and finding it repeated way in the life of Jesus and then in our own lives. Yet we can see from this letter--and really from the whole New Testament-- that this is perhaps the most common method of all in the early church.

Justo: Part of the problem is that the kinds of biblical interpretation that are most common in our day, and that we take for granted are the only ways to interpret the Bible, were not the most common method in ancient times—particularly in the writing of the New Testament.

Perhaps the most common method of Biblical interpretation in our day, especially of Old Testament interpretation, is to see in the Old Testament either commandments or prophecies about the New. From this perspective, when we read the Old Testament what we are looking for is either laws that apply in our day, or prophecies about Jesus, about the church or about us. What is important is the letter of the text, the words it employs, and we seek meaning in those words, either as commandments or as prophecies.

It is clear that much in the Old Testament is commandments. There are not only the Ten Commandments, which appear twice, and the commandment to love God and to love our neighbor. There are also commandments as to what to eat, how to kill and how to prepare it, how to manage the land, what to do with slaves, how to keep, not only the Sabbath, but all other holy days, etc. A problem, however, is that we are clear that not all the laws of the Old Testament can or should be literally applied today. But an even greater problem is that, even if we believed that all the laws of the Old Testament are to be kept literally, there is much in the Old Testament that is not law. How, then, is that to be interpreted?

One option, which this first method of biblical interpretation also employs, is to look for prophetic words—prophetic in the sense that they are words that foretell the future. Certainly, throughout history Christians have found many texts in the Old Testament that may be applied to Jesus, as if the prophets were speaking about him.

But there are also great difficulties with this way of reading the Bible, for, no matter how many texts in a particular prophet we somehow manage to apply to Jesus, there is still an overwhelming majority of the text that we cannot apply. We may read the book of Isaiah, for instance, and say that the passage about the woman conceiving, and the passages about the Suffering Servant, are prophetic announcements of the birth of Jesus and of his suffering. But that still leaves most of the book of Isaiah to be accounted for—to say nothing of First and Second Kings, First and Second Samuel, Joshua and Judges.

Furthermore, the one great flaw with this sort of prophetic interpretation is that it implies that the text is meaningless until the prophecy is fulfilled, and that after it is fulfilled it is irrelevant, except as proof of its own veracity. If what a prophet said referred only to a specific event in the future, it meant nothing to the prophet's contemporaries, except perhaps "wait and see." For all those generations from the time the prophet spoke to the time of the fulfillment of the prophecy, the text still meant nothing but, "wait and see." And, once the event that was foretold has taken place, the text means little more than, "you see? I told you so!"

Catherine: A few years ago, when I was team-teaching the senior preaching course at the seminary, it became clear to me, what problems arise with this "prophecy fulfillment" form of Biblical interpretation. One of the assignments was that the students had to preach on the doctrine of the atonement. One of the students chose Isaiah 53 as the passage he would deal with. Obviously, that is a good choice for such a sermon. But when he wrote the sermon, he

dealt only with how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. I asked how the passage had been understood in Israel when it had been first proclaimed—and he said it had meant nothing to those people. Anything it had said about them was taking away what it said about Jesus. It meant either someone in Israel, or perhaps all of Israel, or it meant Jesus. It could not have meant both. To view scripture as a collection of passages that were spoken to God's People with no meaning for the hearers is a strange view of Scripture indeed. But even more, if it only applies to Jesus, then once it is fulfilled by him, it means nothing about our lives either. It takes away any necessity of our having to follow the way of the cross.

Justo: The fact of the matter is that the vast majority of the text of the Old Testament is narrative in nature. It is neither commandments nor prophecy, but straightforward accounts of the history of Israel. What are we to do with those?

It is at this point that some people turn to a second method of biblical interpretation: Allegory. From this perspective, Scripture is really an allegory that expresses eternal truths, and what we must do in order to interpret a text is to discover its hidden allegorical meaning. This method was already quite common by the third century A.D., when Christians found that there was much in the Old Testament that could not be interpreted as either law or prophecy. Take for instance the conquest of the Holy Land, and the instructions connected with it. What are we to do with that? It certainly doesn't sound very religious! The answer that some Christians find is that this does not really refer to the Holy Land, but to the conquest of our own evil desires.

When we let the Lord in, they say, every vestige of the old must be destroyed. That is what the conquest of the Promised Land means. The cities whose walls must be brought down are those things of which we pride ourselves, which must also be brought down. The animals that must be slaughtered are our evil habits, for if only one of those is permitted to continue living, it will grow and destroy our spiritual life. And so on.

To this day, allegory is an easy way out when we don't know what to do with a text. I remember the case of a student who was assigned to preach on the text of Palm Sunday..."Do you realize you have made an ass of yourself?"

The problem with allegory: the magician's hat.

All of these methods are common in our day. Generally, fundamentalists turn to law and prophecy, while liberals turn to allegory. The problem with one alternative is that it doesn't know what to do with that part of the Bible that is neither law nor prophecy. The problem with the other is that, like the magician who puts the rabbit in the hat, it does with the Bible whatever it pleases, and ultimately the final authority is not Scripture, but the interpreter.

All of these methods have one point in common: they deal with the text rather than with the events to which the text refers.

There is, however, another method of biblical interpretation, which was the most commonly used church, and which is what we find in First Peter. This method is usually called “typology.”

What is meant by this word is that there are certain patterns of God’s action in history, and that what we are to do is to discover those patterns and our place and responsibility in them. This is called “typology,” because ancient writers referred to those patterns as “types” or “figures.”

Perhaps the best way to understand this view is to think of history as a symphony. From the very beginning of a symphony, a number of themes appear. Again and again, those themes are not discernible. But, if the symphony is good, they are not mere repetitions. They appear in different contexts, with different shades, relating to each other in a variety of ways. As long as the symphony continues, we have a sense of meaning, of direction; but everything does not come into place until the final chords, which bring it all together.

From this perspective, all of Scripture is important, for all of it tells of God’s dealings with the people, and of patterns of rebellion, challenge, obedience and so on which continue to this day. There is a continued history of God’s dealings with God’s people. As we look at those dealings, we see them with the combination of understanding and perplexity with which we hear a symphony for the first time. We are in the middle of the symphony. The themes appear again and again. We make sense of them. Yet, the full sense is not yet complete. We must await for the playing out of the symphony.

The one difference for Christians is that in a sense the meaning of the symphony has already been revealed. It has been revealed because the symphony has already reached its climax in the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, in a sense, we know how the symphony is going to end. And yet, in another sense, we still await its fulfillment, when he shall come again.

It is from this perspective that First Peter uses and quotes the Old Testament. It is not just quoting words that have somehow been fulfilled. It is speaking out of a history, and within a history, in which all of these things told in the Old Testament are part of our history.

Catherine: The problem with my student who had to preach on Isaiah 53 was that he thought that if Isaiah 53 referred to Jesus it could not refer to anything else. But the New Testament does not deal with the Suffering Servant in that way. It assumes that this strange way of the righteous suffering on behalf of others is a method God has of bringing about the redemption of the world. Israel in exile was called to understand this role. Christ not only understood it but willingly and totally carried it out. We too may be called to such a path, even as those early Christians were. This typological method of Biblical interpretation makes that clear.

Justo: From the perspective of typology, which is clearly the perspective of I Peter, Isaiah 53 is an example of the manner in which God uses suffering for redemptive purposes. When these words in Isaiah were first spoken, they applied directly to his situation. Israel was a suffering

servant, and her suffering was redemptive and played part in God's plan. When the early Christian Church applied this passage to Jesus, they were right, for He is the suffering servant par excellence. He is the One who brings this theme in the divine symphony to its fulfillment. There is no other Suffering Servant like him. And yet, the symphony has not ended. The theme still resounds. And therefore I Peter can call on Christians to model their lives after Jesus, the Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 is indeed an announcement of the cross of Jesus; not because it refers to nothing else, but because it tells of a pattern of God's action which reaches its highest point in Calvary. But Isaiah 53, and the cross, are also about us, for as long as the symphony has not ended we are called upon to take up our cross and follow the Master of the cross!

The same may be said about the Exodus and the entrance to the Promised Land. The God who led the people out of bondage and into the Promised Land is the same God who now leads us out of all sorts of bondage and into the freedom of the Kingdom. This is why, in the text that we quoted yesterday, Paul can speak of Christ accompanying those who left Egypt: "I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food, and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ." Christians are not only the people of the church. We are also the people of the flood, the people of the crossing of the Red Sea, the people of the wanderings in the desert, the people of the Promised Land.

Catherine: These early Christians not only thought of themselves as living in this continued history of the Exodus and the Cross and Resurrection; their liturgical celebrations became for them the actual events, the moments in which they lived out this history. The relative bareness of our liturgies—our worship—is to a degree related to our understanding of how Scripture is interpreted. We often think of the Sacraments as things to be done “because they are commanded,” as the fulfilling of the law. And it is true that they are commanded. But fulfilling a law does not lead to the same dramatic action, the same sense of celebration, as does the understanding that in our celebration, the events of Exodus, the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, are now, in our midst, coming into our lives.

Lying behind many of the images of I Peter is the ancient baptismal ceremony. We need to see that ceremony related to the understanding of typology that Justo has just described. In fact, this letter draws so heavily upon the baptismal ceremonies that some scholars have thought the heart of the letter could once have been delivered as a sermon at baptism!

Several writings from the second century have been discovered in the last century or so, and they have revolutionized our understanding of how baptism was both understood and celebrated in the second century. Since liturgy is by nature conservative—congregations do not like to have it changed!—many of the elements we have discovered in the second century liturgies were probably already present by the end of the first century.

Imagine the situation: We are speaking of largely Gentile churches, where those who decide to become members of the congregation would be required to undergo some thorough training, not only in regard to what they are to believe in terms of doctrine, but equally important, how they are to behave and live their lives. Usually this training would take about two years. These people who are “in training” for the faith are called catechumens. Every year, about three and a half weeks before Easter—on a Wednesday—those catechumens whom the bishop feels are ready to be baptized, ready to become part of the Body of Christ—will be brought before the congregation. As each one is presented, the congregation will be asked if any one knows any reason why they should not be baptized (rather like the question in the old wedding service!). If nothing negative is mentioned—such as, “I saw them offering a sacrifice at one of the local pagan temples a month ago.” or “They have been carrying on a feud with a neighbor and have spread nasty rumors about them.” Or some other action that goes against the new life they are about to enter—if nothing negative is reported, then the person’s name is enrolled in the list of those to be baptized on the Saturday night before Easter Sunday.

From that Wednesday until Easter, the Scripture lessons and the sermons will deal with the meaning of baptism, using typologically most of the Old Testament passages in which water plays a prominent role. This period of time before Easter, beginning on a Wednesday, was eventually extended to cover 40 days, excluding Sundays, and became what we now call Lent. Originally it was the time of final preparation for baptism of those who were to be added to the church that year, as well as the time of the renewal and recommitment of Christians who had

been baptized in the years before.

When the Saturday before Easter arrived, the congregation would be gathered together in their place of worship, praying and singing. The candidates for baptism would be in a separate place. The baptistery was unlike anything any of our churches use now. Evidently it was deep enough for the person to go into it, but probably they had to kneel down to have the water come up to any depth on them. The children, the women, and the men were baptized in separate groups, for reasons of modesty. Each one entered the water naked. If this was to be a second birth, one arose from the font in the same condition one was born—naked. (In the baptisms of women, deaconesses had a great role, again, so as to preserve modesty.) As the person was in the water, they were asked the questions that, in the Western church, in statement form, became known as the Apostles' Creed. "Do you believe in God the Father almighty?" When the response was made, "Yes, I believe," the next question was asked: "And do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, dead, and buried..." and so on, through the three parts of the Creed. These ancient liturgies also specify that if the children were too young to answer for themselves, an adult should answer for them. The assumption was that if the parents were becoming Christians, the children would also be growing up in that faith and should be baptized.

When the candidates came from the water, they dried themselves off, and then were clothed in a white robe. Then they were anointed with oil in the forehead, by the bishop, using the sign of

the cross.

The words that were used in the liturgy made clear what was understood. Those who entered the water were actually joining in the death of Christ. They were being buried with him as they were buried in the water. As they arose from the water, they were arising to the new life, joining in Christ's resurrection. They were also joining ancient Israel in the Exodus, leaving behind the time of bondage. They were joining those on Noah's ark, who were rescued from the flood when God brought judgment on the earth by means of water.

The sealing with oil also had its significance. Anointing with oil was the sign of the priest and of the king in Israel. To be signed with oil was to receive the commission to be part of the royal and priestly people. Above all, Jesus is called "The Christ" because he is the "anointed one"—the one anointed by God as the Messiah. "Christ" is a Greek term meaning "the anointed one." So they were also anointed, as we become part of Christ's body, the church.

The night before Easter was the most appropriate time, for having joined in Christ's death, these newly baptized ones were ready to celebrate with Christ and the rest of the Christian community the Resurrection of Christ.

When all have been baptized and anointed, still dressed in their new white robes, they were brought into the congregation, with great joy. The church was still a tiny minority in the Roman

Empire, yet it grew rapidly. Therefore the number of the baptized might well change greatly the size of the congregation. For the first time, these newly baptized were now to be present for the celebration of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. Before, even catechumens had been asked to leave, not because the sacrament was a secret, but because it was impossible to invite someone to be present and not participate. That would rather be like inviting someone from another culture to come to our home for a traditional Thanksgiving Dinner, and then tell them they can watch, but they cannot participate. For the early church it was clear that only those who were actually part of the body of Christ, which meant baptized, would receive the sacrament of his body. Others could not be present because they could not receive.

So now came the great celebration of the Lord's Resurrection—the Table of the Lord, where the Risen Lord was in some strange fashion encountered. Those who had just some been baptized received communion first. And they received the bread, and then drank from three different chalices. The first was of water, so they could be baptized on the inside as well as the outside. The second was a chalice of milk and honey, to show that by baptism they had not only been brought safely across the Red Sea out of Egypt, but also across the Jordan into the Promised Land. Never again would they receive these two chalices. These were only for the newly baptized. Then they received the chalice of wine.

All baptisms were at Easter. If someone had been prepared for baptism at this time, but because of illness or some equally significant factor had not been able to be baptized then, they could be

baptized at Pentecost. But Easter and baptism were seen as parallel, and therefore the most appropriate time to enter into the ongoing history of God's redemptive acts.

The awareness of this ancient liturgy helps us to understand many otherwise unexpected images and allusions in I Peter. The putting off the old life and putting on new—like the old clothes that are taken off and the new put on; the newborn babes who long for spiritual milk in this new life; the call to be a royal priesthood; the reference to the flood and the ark, to which baptism corresponds—all of these are made clearer by an understanding of the ancient baptismal practices. And those practices are best understood alongside the typological form of biblical interpretation.

Justo: There is power in worship we often miss. It is significant that time after time, when the church has been persecuted, or when states have put the church under disadvantage hoping that it would die out, churches that have had a strong sense of liturgy have also had the power to resist and to survive even in the most difficult situations. Such is the case, for instance, of the church in Russia. Ninety years ago, most Western Protestants would have said that the Russian Church was too ritualistic, that there was no meaning in its services, that it was practically dead. We would have said this on the basis of our own shallow understanding of liturgy, that only words and clearly expressed ideas are important. And yet, after all these decades of difficulty, the Russian Church has not only survived, but even come back as an undeniable element in Russian life. Why? To a great extent because it had a sense of the living liturgy, of liturgy as the

action by which we are grafted into the great deeds of God.

It is clear that this is one of the central elements in First Peter. By being baptized into Christ, believers are also empowered to live out of that baptism. By constantly bringing to mind that baptism, they are enabled to take up the cross of Christ. By seeing their own sufferings within the typology of the cross, those early Christians were able not only to survive in the midst of sufferings and even persecution, but also to thrive; and not only to thrive, but eventually even to conquer the forces that had persecuted them. Can we learn from them? We most certainly can. Will we learn from them? Let us hope so!

