

June 29, 2003

Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When someone opens the Four Gospels for the first time, even if he is yet an unbeliever, it seems hardly possible that he will fail to observe the compassion and gentleness of Jesus of Nazareth. Even though such a reader cannot yet correctly answer the question, "What think ye of the Christ? Whose Son is He?" he nonetheless finds vibrant in those pages a figure "who went about doing good" (Acts 10:38), a Person supremely attractive for His gentleness and mercy. Jesus Himself, moreover, drew attention to this trait, making it a motive for men to become His disciples. "Take My yoke upon you," He said, "and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29).

Five aspects of this self-description of Jesus are especially striking and worthy of reflection.

First, the Greek word here translated as "gentle," *\*praüs\**, conveys the sense of humility and heartfelt meekness. Indeed, the words "gentle" and "lowly in heart," placed together in this verse, form an adjectival hendiadys expressing a single idea. Significantly, *\*praüs\** is also the adjective that Matthew uses to speak of those meek who will inherit the earth (5:5). With respect to the gentleness of Jesus Himself, this same evangelist cites a prophecy of Isaiah (42:2-3) that he sees fulfilled thereby: "He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoking flax He will not quench" (12:19-20).

Second, the immediate context of Jesus' invitation to "learn" from Him speaks of His communion with the Father: "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27). The gentleness of Jesus, then, is not simply a preferred psychological trait, as it were. Rather, it is revelatory of the gentleness of God. It shows forth the regard of the Father toward those who agree to "learn" from Jesus.

Third, there is nothing weak and feeble about the gentleness of Jesus. It is, rather, the gentleness of the divine strength. Those tempted to interpret the gentleness of Jesus

as some sort of benign "non-judgmentalism" and general tolerance are invited to examine more closely the very context in which Matthew speaks of it. Our understanding of Jesus' gentleness must be sufficiently energetic to include such sentiments as "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! . . . And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades. . . . But I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you" (11:21,23,24). Jesus discoursed of His communion with the Father and His gentleness toward men, Matthew informs us, "at the very time" (\*en ekeino to kairo\* - 11:25) that He spoke these very harsh words to the unrepentant cities of Galilee. Evidently the gentleness of Jesus is not incompatible with a generous measure of brimstone.

Fourth, Jesus' gentleness has special reference to His suffering and death. The other time when Matthew uses the adjective \*praüs\* to describe our Lord is found in the story of His dramatic entry into Jerusalem to inaugurate His Passion. Matthew quotes a prophecy of Zechariah (9:9), which Jesus thus fulfills: "Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, gentle, and sitting on a donkey'" (21:5). The gentleness of Jesus is the humility of the cross, that obedience by which He emptied Himself and took upon Him the form of the Suffering Servant, whose redemptive suffering and death is so graphically described in the Book of Isaiah (Philippians 2:7).

Finally, the gentleness of Jesus is not simply the context in which we learn from Him. It also pertains to the substance of what we learn. The Father does not reveal His Son to "the wise and prudent" of this world, but to the "little ones" (\*nepiois\*, Matthew 11:25). These "little ones" are those who, because the Father reveals His Son to them, are able to recognize the King who comes to Jerusalem, gentle and sitting on a donkey. It is of them that this King, in that very context, declares, "Out of the mouths of little ones (\*nepioi\*) and nursing infants You have perfected praise" (21:16). To learn from the gentle Christ, then, is to become like Him and thus find rest for our souls.

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