

February 8, 2004

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Since the story of Pilate's wife is found only in the Gospel of Matthew (27:19), it seems reasonable to examine it specifically through the perspective of Matthew. What function is served by that very short narrative in that particular Gospel?

Commentators have remarked that Pilate's wife, a Gentile woman who pleads the innocence of Jesus ("that just man") serves as a literary foil to the Jewish leaders who clamor for his crucifixion (27:23). This comment is surely accurate, but it does not indicate a larger context nor an intention specific to Matthew.

Indeed, this is the sort of story we might more readily have expected in Luke. The latter, after all, is rather preoccupied with showing that the Roman authorities regarded Jesus as innocent (Luke 23:4,14-15,20,47), and among the four evangelist he is certainly the one that writes most often about women, whether in Jesus' parables or in actual associates of our Lord.

It seems, then, that a closer examination of Matthew 27:19 is required. The text says that while Pilate "was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, 'Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him.'"

This woman is portrayed, not only as resistant to the official plot to murder Jesus, but as having "suffered many things today in a dream because of Him." The most striking item here, I suggest, is her dream. The dream, then, is the place to start.

This Gentile's dream near the end of Matthew clearly forms a literary inclusion with the dream of certain other Gentiles near that Gospel's beginning. There we are told, with respect to the Magi, that "being divinely warned in a dream that they

should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way" (2:12). That is the last appearance of the Magi.

The contexts of these two dreams are strikingly similar. In each case the dream takes place in connection with an official plot to kill Jesus. In the instance of the Magi this plot includes the official representative of the Roman government, King Herod, who has "gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together" (2:4). In the instance of Pilate's wife, the murderous plot involves "all the chief priests and elders of the people" (27:1,12,20; the scribes are included in 27:41). In both cases the dreams of the Gentiles are contrasted with the plots of Jesus' enemies. Pilate's wife near the end of Matthew stands parallel to the Magi near its beginning.

In each case, moreover, the plot to murder Jesus has to do with His kingship, His status as the Messiah. In the example of the Magi, these come from the East "to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?'" (2:1-2). The usurping Herod, threatened by the suspected appearance of Israel's true king, takes all the necessary precautions, including the murder of "all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under" (2:16).

The expression "King of the Jews" does not appear in Matthew again until the final plot against Jesus. It is while Pilate officiates in his judgment seat, and just before receiving the message from his wife, that he inquires, "Are You the King of the Jews?" (27:11). The source of Pilate's question here is indicated in the next verse, which tells us that "He was being accused by the chief priests and elders" (27:12). These chief priests and others correspond to the group that Herod summoned earlier when he made his own inquiry about the King of the Jews.

Matthew tells us that Pilate "knew that they had handed Him over because of envy." Indeed, he mentions this in the verse immediately preceding the message from his wife (27:18-19). This envy of Jesus' enemies readily puts the reader in mind of the earlier envy of Herod, when he too was confronted with the real King of the Jews.

There is a special irony, then, to the title by which Pilate's soldiers address Jesus in their mockery: "Hail, King of the Jews" (27:29). Pilate, moreover, apparently with a view to mocking the Jews themselves, attaches to the cross the official accusation against Jesus: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (27:39). At last is answered that question first put by the Magi, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" (2:2:2) He is on the cross, the just Man dying for the sins of the world.

Thus, the dream of Pilate's wife, which had revealed Jesus to be a just Man, completes the earlier dream of the Magi. The testimony from the East is matched by the testimony from the West, both cases representing those regarding whom Jesus commanded His Church, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

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