

March 25, 2007

The Feast of the Annunciation

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that a Roman "centurion" stood near the cross and witnessed the death of Jesus. Mark is the only one to use here the military expression *kentyrion* (15:39,44,45), which is in fact a word transliterated from the Latin *centurio* (as earlier in Polybius 6.24.5). Indeed, this Latin word does not appear in the New Testament except in Mark, whose Gospel, according to the earliest testimonies, was written at Rome and for the Romans. To describe this same military officer, Matthew use the corresponding Greek word *hekatontarchos*, literally a "commander of a hundred" (27:54), and Luke the variant *hekatontarches* (23:47).

This centurion is quoted in response to the death of Jesus in all three of these gospels, though the quotations are not identical in each. A close examination of the biblical text will show, in fact, that these variants themselves are significant, each of them conveying a meaning proper to the gospel in which it appears. I write to undertake that examination.

According to Mark the centurion near the cross, when he witnesses the death of Jesus, cries out, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" We note that this exclamation, which in form differs not at all from a Christian profession of faith, does not arise in response to any of the physical phenomena that accompany the death of Jesus. Although Mark at this point does refer to the rending of the temple veil (15:38), he records no extraordinary physical manifestation at the site of the cross, except for the three hours of darkness (15:33).

The exclamation of the centurion seems to come, rather, in response to Jesus' death, or the cry of dereliction that preceded His death. The centurion's identification of Jesus as "Son of God" near the end of this Gospel thus matches the words with which Mark begins, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It corresponds also to God the Father's revelatory word at Jesus' baptism ("You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"—1:11) and the Transfiguration ("This is My beloved Son"—9:7).

In sum, the centurion's exclamation beside the cross expresses the deepest concern of Mark's Gospel, the true identity of Jesus and His relation to God. In context, this divine identity is revealed precisely in Jesus' sufferings and death. It is at the cross that the centurion, who thus becomes a symbol of Christian faith, addresses the Father's affirmation about His Son.

Matthew's understanding of the centurion's cry follows the path of Mark but goes even further. This centurion, in confessing Jesus as God's Son, stands in contrast to Satan as Matthew describes him in account of Jesus' temptations. The first of those temptations, which followed immediately on the Father's declaration of Jesus as His Son (3: 17) began by a challenge to that declaration: "*If You are* the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (4: 3 emphasis added). In opposition to that challenge, our centurion confesses at the cross, "Truly this was the Son of God" (27:54).

Matthew's centurion illustrates, in addition, the principle that Jesus enunciated earlier with respect to the recognition of His own identity, namely, that "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). As the recipient of this divine revelation, Matthew's centurion is a spokesman for the Church, sharing in Simon Peter's foundational confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16).

Finally, in Luke's account, where the centurion more modestly confesses, "Certainly this was a righteous Man" (23: 47), he serves as the spokesman less for the Church than for the Roman Empire. The centurion delivers the final verdict, as it were, in Jesus' trial. Although that earlier Roman official, Pontius Pilate, repeatedly admitted that he found no fault in Jesus (23: 4, 14, 23), he condemned Him nonetheless. Rome's final word on Jesus in Luke, however, comes from the Roman that watched Him die. Even as he announced Jesus' innocence, says Luke, "he glorified God" (23: 47). This glorification of God at the end of Jesus' life matches that at its beginning, when "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen" (2: 20).

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