

July 8, 2007

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Besides its special emphasis on the prophet Elijah, Mark's account of the Transfiguration shows several other features particular to that Gospel.

By way of introducing Mark's narrative, I suggest that we first look at Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, as recorded in the Book of Exodus: "Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud" (24:16). This reference to the six days of waiting (corresponding to the days of creation) provides the best reason why, in Mark's account (copied later by Matthew), the Transfiguration takes place six days after the Lord's prophetic words, "Amen, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power" (Mark 9:1-2). That is to say, Mark's reference to the six days' interval begins to establish parallel lines between Mount Sinai and the mountain of Transfiguration.

Mark traces a second such line with respect to Moses' three companions who are specifically named as climbing the mountain with him: "'Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel" (Exodus 24:1). We observe that two of these companions are brothers, which is exactly the case in the witnesses of the Lord's Transfiguration: "Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them" (Mark 9:2). In this text James and John correspond to Nadab and Abihu.

The other details of the Transfiguration, such as the mountain (9:2), the glorious light (9:3), the cloud, and the divine voice (9:7), correspond to identical particulars in the scene on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1-2,15-16). In short, Mark understands the Transfiguration to be strictly theophanic, an appearance of God.

In this respect the true correspondence to Mount Sinai is Jesus Himself, who has now become the place of God's presence and revelation.

As so often in the New Testament, Peter becomes the spokesman for the Twelve: "Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"-because he did not know what he answered, for they were greatly afraid" (Mark 9:5-6). This "did not know" may mean that Peter was saying *more* than he knew.

Two things, I suggest, pertain to this *more* than Peter knew.

First, the Transfiguration was for the sake of the three witnesses, not for Jesus. He was transfigured "before *them*" (9:5); *they* are overshadowed (9:7); it was good for *them* to be there (9:7); *they* are told to hear (9:7); Jesus was with *them* (verse 8). What Mark describes here is the religious experience of the disciples.

This "subjective" aspect of the vision on the mountain puts readers in mind of the Agony in the Garden (14:33), suggesting that these same three witnesses of the Transfiguration were thereby strengthened to endure the later trial. This correspondence is noted, to the same purpose, in the Church's Troparion for the feast of the Transfiguration.

Second, Peter's reference to the "three tents" puts readers in mind of the feast of Tabernacles, which was also celebrated as a feast of lights. Indeed, it was on Mount Sinai that Moses received instructions to construct the Tabernacle of the Lord's presence (Exodus 26), that same Tabernacle that would be filled with the cloud of the divine glory (Exodus 40:34-38).

Mark ends the story with the uniqueness of Jesus: "Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves" (Mark 9:8). The Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), having their full and intended meaning in the vision of the glorified Christ, disappear from the scene on the mountain. There remains only Jesus, concerning whom the divine voice, coming out of the cloud, announces, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" (9:7). After all the attention given to their vision, the disciples are finally directed to return to their "hearing." Their attentive hearing is directed to the beloved Son, already introduced at the Lord's baptism (1:11; cf. 12:6). With Him they now come down from the mountain (9:9).

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