

July 29, 2007

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

St. Luke, in his portrayal of the Lord's Transfiguration (9:28-36), displays certain features proper to his own story of Jesus.

These begin right away, when he tells us, "Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray." We recall that Matthew (17:1) and Mark (9:2) both placed the Transfiguration six days later, not eight. Luke doesn't say "eight" either; he says "*about* eight," but why the change?

It appears that the event of the Lord's Transfiguration was early associated with the feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*), an association prompted by Peter's suggestion, "let us make three tabernacles." Indeed, the luminous cloud of which the gospels speak in the Transfiguration is to be identified with the glorious cloud that filled the Tabernacle of the Lord's presence in Numbers 9-10.

The association of the Transfigured Lord with the Feast of Tabernacles perhaps suggests why Luke changed the "six days" to "about eight days." The feast of Tabernacles does, in fact, last a week and another day (Leviticus 23:34-36).

A second distinctive feature of Luke's account is also found in that same first verse of the story; namely, the detail that Jesus "went up on the mountain *to pray*." Only Luke mentions the prayer of Jesus in this place, and he goes on to describe the Transfiguration with reference to the prayer of Jesus: "*As He prayed*, the appearance of His face was altered." Whereas Matthew and Mark portray the Transfiguration as a religious experience of its three apostolic witnesses, Luke begins with the experience of Jesus.

Thirdly, only Luke among the evangelists mentions a reference to the Lord's suffering and death within the Transfiguration account itself. He writes, "And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His *exodos* that He was going to fulfill (*pleroun*) at Jerusalem."

Several features of this reference to the Passion are important to Luke's theological message. First, he uses the technical theological expression *exodos* to speak of Jesus' death. In his choice of this noun Luke conveys the soteriological significance of the Lord's death.

Second, in his reference to the Lord's *exodos*, Luke explicitly places it "at Jerusalem." This too corresponds to a theme in Luke's Gospel, where the holy city is the culminating place of his narrative. Jerusalem is the city to which Jesus has steadfastly set His face to go (9:51,53; 13:22,33). This theme was

introduced early in Luke, when the Anna the prophetess "spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption *in Jerusalem*" (2:38).

Third, by referring to the Lord's Passion within the Transfiguration story, Luke sets up a scene to parallel the later account of the Lord's Agony. Indeed, in the latter scene Luke does not even mention Gethsemani or a garden. He says, rather, that Jesus went on a mountain to pray (22:39-41).

Fourth, in his picture of Moses and Elijah--the Law and the Prophets--discussing Jesus' *exodos* at Jerusalem, Luke touches a major theme of his theology--the fulfillment (*pleroun*) of Holy Scripture in what Jesus did at Jerusalem. We recall the later scene with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, of which Luke writes, "Then He said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (24:25-27). Here in the Transfiguration, therefore, Luke portrays Moses and Elijah discussing with Jesus the deep meaning of Holy Scripture, its fulfillment at Jerusalem.

Luke returns to this theme in the Lord's final apparition, where He affirms, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled (*plerothernai*) which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me" (24:44). The great commission begins with this affirmation: "Thus *it is written*, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (24:46). Thus, in Luke's account of the Transfiguration, the representatives of the Law and the Prophets are described as discussing with Jesus His fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

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