

March 23, 2008
The Second Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Unlike his attempt to walk on water (14:28-32), Peter's denials of Jesus are chronicled in all four Gospel accounts. Essential in outline, these versions of the story differ in details, some of them subtle, some of them indicating perspectives peculiar to the individual Evangelist.

For example, only John separates the sequence of Peter's denials, instead of telling them all at once. Thus, after Peter's first denial (19:17), John returns to Jesus' interrogation by Annas (19:19-23). Then, when Jesus is sent to Caiaphas (19:24), John continues the story of Peter's next two denials. In this way the structure of John's account advances the story line in two different scenes simultaneously, giving a greater dynamism to the whole account.

John introduces, moreover, the image of the charcoal fire, which ties the story of Peter's denials to the post-Resurrection account of his triple protestation of love for Jesus (19:18; 21:9).

Mark is alone among the Evangelists by including the detail that the rooster crowed twice (14:30,68,72). In fact, the first and second cockcrows refer to two different times during the night, the latter one coming at dawn. Mark thus indicates the fairly lengthy time over which Peter's three denials took place, the last one happening in the morning. This is Mark's way of making the same point as John.

Luke portrays Jesus as turning and looking at Peter while the rooster crows. Thus, Peter receives the testimony of two senses, simultaneously calling to mind the Lord's prophecy of his failure (22:60-62).

Matthew follows in general format the sequence of Peter's denials in Mark: Sitting outside the high priest's residence, in the courtyard, Peter is approached by a servant maid (paidiske), who believes she recognizes him as a companion of Jesus. Peter stands accused of only one thing--being "with" (meta) Jesus, a charge that Matthew is at pains to sustain by his constant references to Peter's being with Jesus all through this chapter (26:20,29,36,40,51)

Apparently surrounded by a crowd, Peter denies the allegation in a voice loud enough to be heard by everybody (26:70). Matthew adds this detail to Mark (14:68), thus heightening the sense of Peter's fear. He begins to move away--from the courtyard, to the porch (Mark), to the gate (Matthew), finally outside.

The more Peter protests his unfamiliarity with Jesus, the more occasions he provides for the bystanders to detect the regional inflections in his speech. Thus, Peter is driven to greater desperation and begins completely to lose control.

The evidence of this breakdown is found in Peter's recourse to an oath in the second denial and to cursing and swearing in the third.

The third denial is prompted by a more general accusation that Peter is one of Jesus' company. Several individuals make this accusation, and John (18:26) includes among their number a relative of the man whose ear Peter wounded with a sword. This man, moreover, was present at the arrest and now recognizes Peter.

Immediately after the third denial, the rooster crows, prompting Peter to remember what Jesus predicted. He remembers, leaves the place, and breaks into tears, now aware that he has added his own failure to the tragedy of the night.

Peter's prominence in the four Gospels reflects his prominence in the first generation of the Church. On Pentecost morning it was his voice that first proclaimed to the world the Resurrection of Christ. For this reason, the four Evangelists tell the story of his triple denial by way of depicting failure at the Church's highest level: If Peter could fall from grace, any Christian can fall from grace, and the gospels take great care to show exactly how it can happen. The steps of Peter's downfall are clearly depicted as a warning to all who hear it.

On the other hand, each of these Evangelists also describes Peter's repentance as immediate. No more than a few seconds separate his downfall from his rising up, and this prompt conversion is likewise incorporated into the narrative of the Passion. Just as failure is possible for everyone, so to no one is the door to repentance closed. Peter's repentance is integral to the story of Jesus' suffering and death, the first fruits of the tree of the Cross.

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