

April 6, 2008
The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

All four canonical gospels relate that Pilate, succumbing at last to the pressure of the mob, handed Jesus over to the unjust punishment of torture and death. Only Matthew (27:24-25), however, includes a final section of dialogue between Pilate and the people, just before Jesus was led away to torture. We will look at each side of this important dialogue---Pilate first, and then the people.

It begins, "When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this man. You see to it.'" In making this gesture, Pilate may have been counseled by some Jews. We suspect this, because the gesture itself was well known to the Jews (cf. Deuteronomy 21:6-9; Psalms 26 [25]:6-10; Isaiah 1:15-16).

In fact, nonetheless, this was a duplicitous and hypocritical action in Pilate's case. Crucifixion was a Roman form of punishment, and Pilate represented Rome. The Jewish punishment for blasphemy, which was, after all, the charge brought against Jesus before the Sanhedrin, was stoning to death. We see this punishment exemplified in the death of Stephen, who also was condemned for blasphemy. The Romans, however, not the Jews, crucified Jesus.

No matter, then, how much water touched Pilate's hands, the decision to execute Jesus was his to make, and he made it. Consequently, his protestation of innocence was hypocritical; he could have saved the life of an innocent man unjustly accused, exercising the justice that the Roman government had sent him to Judea to exercise. In handing Jesus over to death, then, he violated man's law as well as God's.

One fancies that Pilate may have spent the rest of his days remarking, "Yes, it was the most difficult and painful decision I ever had to make." Such references to the difficulties of a moral choice are often invoked by way of excusing a bad moral decision. Such appeals are invariably self-serving, and in no case do they excuse the person from the moral evil of his choice. A sinful decision is still a sinful decision, no matter how difficult. There is no narrative perspective, consequently, in which Pilate can be viewed as anything but a moral coward, condemning an innocent man to a terrible death in order to placate the demands of a mob. It was the whole boast of Rome that it had imposed justice over mob rule.

This brings us to the response of the Jews---the second verse of this brief exchange: "And all the people answered and said, 'His blood is on us and on our children.'" Matthew suddenly stops speaking of a "crowd" and uses the word "people," the expression he normally uses when referring to the Jews as a whole. Indeed, in this place Matthew emphasizes this point by speaking of "*all* the people"---*pas ho laos*. It is as "all the people" that these Jews call down the blood of Jesus on themselves and their children.

Matthew, however, surely means more than this. To appreciate the deep theological significance of this solemn imprecation, it is not on the original setting of the words that we should concentrate. In their original setting it is perfectly obvious what these words meant (cf. Leviticus 20:9-16; Joshua 2:19-20; 2 Samuel 1:16; 14:9).

That original context, however, does not convey the rich theological meaning intended by Matthew. In the pen of the inspired evangelist that chilling imprecation becomes a sort of ironic prayer. The blood summoned onto the heads of the Jews is, after all, what every Christian knows it to be: redemptive blood, the blood of the atonement, the blood described by Jesus as "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:27).

In every other place where the New Testament refers to the blood of Jesus---the Gospels, Paul, Peter, Hebrews, Revelation---this blood is redemptive and sanctifying. Hence, it strains credibility to give the blood of Jesus a different meaning here-at the very point where that blood is about to be shed. Consequently, from the pen of Matthew, it is unreasonable to understand these solemn words except in a full Christian sense---namely, Jesus' blood is to be poured out upon the Jews as it is poured out upon the rest of us: to redeem, to cleanse from sin, and to purchase a people for God.

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