

April 20, 2008
Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Gospel of Matthew includes an important summary of the insults thrown at Jesus as He hung on the Cross: "And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, "I am the Son of God"" (27: 39-43).

This mockery, because it further illustrates Matthew's Christology and soteriology, merits several reflections.

First, in accepting this treatment without complaint or return of insult, Jesus exemplifies His own instructions in the Sermon on the Mount. This patience extends Matthew's theme of a correspondence between that Sermon and the mystery of the Cross.

Second, following Mark (15:29), Matthew understands this mockery as "blasphemy." There is an irony in his indictment of blasphemy against Jesus' enemies here, because this was the very charge that they had brought against Jesus (9: 3; 26: 65).

This understanding of the mockery as "blasphemy" presupposes, of course, the Christian confession of faith, according to which Jesus is the Son of God (16: 16). Because the title "Son of God" was the barbed point sticking in the craw of His enemies (26: 63), it appears also in the final taunts thrown at Jesus (27: 40,43). It is most significant, therefore, that at the moment of Jesus' death, the presiding centurion confesses Him as God's Son. The words of this confession, which are proper to Mark (15:39) and Matthew (27:54; contrast Luke 23:47), are opposed to the taunt that these two evangelists describe as "blasphemy."

Third, the challenge, "if You are the Son of God," likewise ties the story of the crucifixion to the Lord's initial temptation, when Satan said to Him, "If you are the Son of God . . ." (4:3,6). We recall that Satan issued that challenge just three verses after the Father's voice had proclaimed, "This is My beloved Son" (3: 17).

Thus, the great divide in Matthew is between those who, with Simon Peter and the centurion, confess Jesus to be the Son of God and those who in satanic blasphemy deride this title. "Son of God" is the essential, defining confession. (For this reason,

St. John reserves the name "Antichrist" for those who deny Jesus' sonship from the Father [1 John 2:22; 4:2-3]).

Fourth, Matthew's blasphemers, taunting Jesus to demonstrate His divine sonship by coming down from the cross, repeat the temptations of Satan, recorded earlier by Matthew. Satan had challenged the Savior to perform such extraordinary deeds as changing rocks to bread (4:3) and hurling Himself from the pinnacle of the temple (4:6). Jesus' enemies, taking up that blasphemous refrain, now challenge Him to leave the cross. They are Satan's agents.

Fifth, the blasphemers once again repeat the charge, originally made in the house of the high priest (21:61), that Jesus would destroy the temple (27:40). It is likely that Matthew's contemporaries had already seen the temple's destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70 and would appreciate the irony of the accusation (cf. 21:41,43).

Sixth, Matthew portrays these mockeries as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy (27:42-43). He does this by wording the taunts in language evocative of Psalm 21 (22): 7-8-"All those who see Me ridicule Me;/ They shoot out the lip, they shake the head: 'He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him;/ Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!'" Thus, the enemies of Jesus stand self-accused, becoming the very mockers in the psalm.

Matthew may also have had in mind the scorn of the mockers against the just man in the Wisdom of Solomon: "Let us see then if his words be true, and let us prove what shall happen to him, and we shall know what his end shall be. For if he be the true son of God, He will defend him, and will deliver him from the hands of his enemies. Let us examine him by outrages and tortures, that we may know his meekness and try his patience. Let us condemn him to a most shameful death" (2:17-20).

©2008 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php