

March 15, 2009

The Second Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is instructive to observe the reactions of those to whom Jesus spoke in the Gospel stories. Sometimes, of course, they marveled. "The people were astonished at His teaching," we are told, "for He taught them as one having authority." They said of Him, "No man ever spoke like this Man!"

Nonetheless, the words of Jesus were contradicted on occasion, as we may see in all four gospels. We expect such contradiction from Jesus' enemies, obviously but sometimes we find it among His friends. Simon Peter tried this on at least one occasion: "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him." That response of Peter, as I recall, was not terribly effective.

We sense that Peter may have been habitually disposed to this sort of reaction. For example, when Jesus told His fishermen to drop their nets for a catch, Peter answered, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing." But then he caught himself, as it were, and gave the appropriate response: "nevertheless at Your word I will lower the net." We are not certain that Peter ever overcame his tendency to contradict God. In the Book of Acts, we still find him doing it, in that scene where the Lord spoke to him on the rooftop just before lunch.

When the words of Jesus were especially hard to grasp, the disciples were evidently not timid about saying so. Thus, when He announced, "where I go you know, and the way you know," Thomas answered, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?"

Given the depth of the mysteries of which our Lord spoke, we are not surprised at the sometimes shallow---and even silly---responses of those who listened to Him. Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well come to mind in this respect.

On other occasions, the disciples expressed bewilderment or dismay at something or other Jesus said. For instance, when He turned in a crowd and inquired who touched Him, they responded, "You see the multitude thronging You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?'" The Lord seems not to have been bothered by this. Nor---as far as I can tell---did He reprimand Martha, who raised an objection to removing the stone from the tomb of Lazarus: "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for it has been four days."

I can think of one instance when someone effectively offered an alternative to something Jesus had proposed: When He was approached by the centurion, who sought healing for his servant, our Lord suggested, "I will come and heal him." However, when the centurion counter-proposed, "speak only a word, and my servant will be healed," Jesus praised the man's faith.

I can think of only one instance when someone directly contradicted Jesus and, not only got away with it, but even received praise for the effort. This story deserves a closer look. It tells of a woman described by Mark as "a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth." She was, in short, a Gentile.

Jesus, we recall, at first declined to help this woman, who had come to Him seeking assistance for a troubled daughter. Indeed, our Lord even insulted her with the comment, "it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the puppies."

This harsh comment would neither have shocked nor surprised the Jews who first heard and recorded it. As Gentiles joined the Christian Church, however, that the insult in that comment became troublesome. Indeed, there was a true irony in the thing, inasmuch as this story, which directly answered the question about the admission of Gentiles to the Church, was necessarily offensive to Gentiles! It is not surprising, then, that Luke, writing chiefly for Gentiles, omitted the account completely.

Its inclusion in the gospels of Mark and Matthew is explained by the woman's response: "True, Lord, but even the puppies under the table eat from the children's crumbs." Jesus remarked on that answer---and certainly it was remarkable---commenting (in Matthew) on the woman's invincible faith.

What must be further noted, I believe, is that the woman herself *prevailed* in this encounter with Jesus, offering her compelling argument that the Messianic grace of Israel should become available to the Gentiles. Her place in the history of Salvation was assured by the truly clever way she gave that history a new direction.

What this woman did, in fact, was win her argument with Jesus about Jews and Gentiles. She did it with grace, humility, and faith, obviously, but she also did it with rhetoric. The lady proposed a solution to the historical (and rhetorical) impasse contained in Jesus' comment about children and dogs. That is to say, her wit and skill found a way to overcome what classical rhetoric and logic called an *aporia*, an "obstacle" or "barrier" in an argument. St Augustine, well trained in the art of classical rhetoric, readily perceived this. Commenting on the story in one of his sermons, he actually employed the unusual verb *aporiabatur* to describe the argumentative obstacle raised by Jesus (*Sermons* 154A.3).

To my mind, the woman's answer to our Lord borders on breathtaking, and, as far as I can tell, it is quite without parallel in Holy Scripture. By means of her rhetorical skill, she *bested* Him in an argument about the scope of the Messianic blessings! In fact, in Mark's version of the story, the Savior explicitly indicates this: "Because of this word [*dia touton ton logon*], go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." If I dared to paraphrase this admission of Jesus, it would go something like this: "Ma'am, you have quite a way with words. You have Me on that one. The demon is gone from your daughter."

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