

January 24, 2010

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the literary characteristics of the gospels, one of the most significant is their episodic structure. Although each gospel is an integral literary composition, anyone can see that they were intended to be read story-by-story. These small narratives go by the Greek name *pericope*, which means "a rounded section." Obviously, the established lectionaries present the gospels this way.

The life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus are presented to the Church in these enclosed frames of narrative. Christians assimilate the mystery of Redemption in bite-size stories. Each account represents a window, as it were, through which believers contemplate the *apologos katholikos*, the story as a whole.

Let me suggest that the episodic quality of the gospels prompts a comparison with framed art and the stage. Indeed, I submit that all these forms take their rise from the same impulse: the need for a concentrated regard in order to contemplate the whole. Chesterton perceived this need when he remarked on "the boundary line that brings one thing sharply against another." He went on to explain, "All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window."

A framed gaze at reality---whether in the theater, or pictorial art, or episodic narrative---enjoys a two-fold advantage:

First, recognizing that limitation is necessary to form, it draws contemplation to a focus. Whether in a scene of Macbeth or a seascape of Turner, one receives the whole truth in a size not too hard to ingest.

Second, the lines of a frame indicate an appropriate humility in the presentation. A framework announces, even before the story begins, that the composition strives to be no more than an "outline." I prefer here the German expression, *Grundriss*, which better insinuates both the foundational aspect of the enterprise and the humility of the ground.

The Gospel itself declares the benefit of this humility: "Whoever humbles himself will be exalted." In a framed presentation the myriad elements left unspoken form an internal and luminous exaltation, an intimation of energy. The cataphatic components of a scene implicitly convey a greater glory.

That is to say, the limitations imposed by the frame are not negative, but positive. For instance, neither in life nor on canvas does a sane viewer gaze

straight at the sun. Indeed, a direct attention to the sun precludes the sight of anything else. The sun's exaltation is discerned, rather, in the contrast of lights and shadows. The wind, too, lies humble on the canvas; its exaltation is conveyed in the bent branches and the turbulence of the wave.

In the theater, the energy and exaltation of a given scene come largely from off-stage. They derive from the plot and context of the whole story. Indeed, few theatrical scenes are intelligible except within an "act" and the entire production. Plot and assumed context provide the sun and wind, as it were, of the narrative in the immediate scene.

Windows are usually quadrangular, in contrast to the proscenium's arch and the circularity suggested by the noun "pericope." Quadrangles are far more reliable than circles; these have a tendency to roll away. The quadrangle, by keeping everything steady, favors an analytic consideration of the subject. The viewer is disposed to pose questions. Angles encourage rationality.

Indeed, the quadrangle is a bold effort to hold a circle in place. It deliberately sunders the fluidity of the curve, for the purpose of critical appraisal. Parsing the 360 degrees around the circle's center, it sends them off into four opposing corners to turn around and face one another. Angles---literally---reflect. The viewer is obliged to come at the subject from dialectically contrasted points, where progressing lines actually stop and "bend back."

A similar angularity contours the gospels---a feature, I suggest, favoring critical reflection on their content. Lines are drawn up against one another. Sundry tensions are strung from contrasting corners. The stress of opposition is everywhere: Jesus and His enemies, a rich man and Lazarus, deformity and healing, stormy waves and a calm sea, Mary and Martha, before and after, life and death, heaven and hell, "You have heard it said" and "But I say unto you," and so on. The concentrated energy of each scene discloses the drama of the whole story.

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