

January 9, 2010

The Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The scene of Jesus agonizing in the Garden, on the night before His death, is among the most disturbing presentations among the Gospel narratives. Specifically, it seems much out of character with what the Gospel stories---up to this point---would lead the reader to expect. The image of Jesus here stands in stark contrast to the way He has hitherto been portrayed throughout His life. Where, now, is the serenity and self-assurance that tells the leper, "I will it; be cleansed" (Matthew 8: 3)? What has become of the confidence that announces to the centurion, "I will come and heal him" (8: 7)?

Here, more than anywhere else in the New Testament, we are presented with the phenomenon of an inner conflict of mind and heart, as Jesus struggles with the trauma of His impending Passion and Death (Matthew 26: 36-46; Mark 14: 32-42; Luke 22: 39-46; Hebrews 5: 7-8). The conflict is described in terms of spirit and flesh. It is of this experience in the Garden that Jesus declares, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26: 38).

Whether Jesus' conflict is conveyed in terms of sorrow (Matthew and Mark) or fear (Luke and Hebrews), these New Testament sources agree that He *did not want* to suffer and die a painful and most ignominious death, and He prayed to be delivered from it. Here, above all, we are presented with the profound mystery of self-emptying that the Apostle Paul called "the weakness of God."

The four New Testament accounts of the Agony convey a dramatic conflict between the powerful psychological disposition of Jesus and what He perceives to be the will of God. The two options are mutually exclusive. Luke calls it a "struggle," an *agonia*. Each writer testifies to Jesus' intense psychological experience of weakness, doubt, and, finally, resolution. Each account of the Agony demonstrates how "the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1: 25).

The resolution and renewed strength are conveyed to Jesus through His experience of prayer. According to all four accounts, it was in prayer that He resolved the conflict in His soul. Indeed, each writer goes into some detail to describe this prayer and the transforming resolution to which it leads.

In respect to this resolution, it is instructive to contrast the turbulence and trauma of Jesus in the Garden, not only with earlier scenes in His life, but also with His serenity and composure during the rest of the night and the following day.

This new composure and sense of resolution, attained in His prayer, continues to the end. In the course of His two trials---Jewish and Roman---Jesus maintains a demeanor both calm and self-possessed, even as He endures indignities and great suffering. Thus, His final statement to the Sanhedrin is both solemn and self-assured (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62). No less dignified and confident are His few words to Pilate (John 18:36-37; 19:11), and He honors the curiosity of Herod with not a single syllable (Luke 23:9).

We recognize, in short, that Jesus' communion with God in the Garden---His prayerful acquiescence in the Father's will---strengthens Him for the dreadful ordeal to come. The Passion story testifies to the personally transforming power of Jesus' prayer in the Garden.

The reference to "vehement cries and tears," in the Epistle to the Hebrews explains, how the early believers came to know about this event---from the apostles specifically named as being near to the scene. All the accounts go back to these three men. As far as we can discern, they alone---situated only "a little farther" off (Matthew 26:39), "about a stone's throw" (Luke 22:41)---were able to see Jesus' kneeling posture (Mark 14:35) and to hear those "vehement cries."

The preservation of this story was neither a decree by fate nor an accident of circumstances. It was entirely deliberate. Jesus could certainly have suffered the Agony in monadic privacy, but He determined that there would be witnesses to it---close enough to behold the scene, because He wanted it to be recorded! Jesus resolved that all His disciples---including "those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29)---should become familiar Him in that hour when He was most obviously in the flesh.

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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

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

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