

January 16, 2011

The Second Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Referring to the two thieves who died on either side of Jesus, Mark's account testifies, "those who were crucified with Him reviled Him" (15:32). During the course of those three hours, however, one of the condemned thieves came to think better of the matter. Luke describes the scene:

"Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come in Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Amen, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise'" (23:39-43).

This is, strictly speaking the only "conversation" Jesus has on the Cross. Since it is found only in the Gospel of Luke, it is to this Gospel that we should turn to understand it. We divide our attention to the immediate context, which is the crucifixion, and then to the wider context of Luke's Gospel as a whole.

With respect to Luke's immediate context, three considerations suggest themselves:

First, this scene with the thieves is the second of three times that Jesus is pronounced innocent in Luke's story. The first pronouncement was made by Pilate and Herod (23:14-15), and the third will issue from the lips of the centurion under the Cross (23:47). This verdict of the penitent thief, then, is added to the chorus of those who profess Jesus to be executed unjustly (23:41).

Second, the blasphemy by the unrepentant thief is the third and culminating instance in which the crucified Jesus is reviled in identical terms. There were, first, the Jewish rulers who challenged Jesus to save Himself if He was the Messiah (23:35). Then the Gentile soldiers defied Him to save Himself, if He was a king (23:37). Finally, the unrepentant thief challenges Jesus to save Himself, adding "and us" (23:39). We observe that the same verb, "save" or *sozein*, is used in all three instances. The thief's reviling of the Lord thus forms a climax to the theme of "save."

This series of blasphemies prepares for the culminating irony, in which only one man, the "good thief," perceives the true path to being "saved." He boldly lays

hold on the true meaning of Jesus' death-salvation! He is the "good thief," indeed; in this last, boldest, and most ironic act of theft, he leans over to one side, says a few words, and steals eternal life.

Third, the encounter with the two thieves immediately precedes the death of Jesus, so that Jesus' words to the second thief, promising to meet him that day in Paradise, are His last recorded words to another human being during His earthly life. This final kindness, His message to the thief, represents the last thing Jesus has to say to His disciples on this earth.

With regard to the larger literary context---Luke's Gospel as a whole---there are two points particularly worthy of note in this story of the thieves:

First, in drawing a contrast between the two thieves, Luke follows a pattern of antithesis that he employs throughout his entire narrative. For instance, it is Luke who immediately opposes the Beatitudes with the Woes (6:20-26). It is Luke who elaborates in detail the difference between the Pharisee and the woman who came into his house (7:44-47).

It is Luke, likewise, who contrasts two men who went up to the temple to pray (18:9-14), the two sons of the same father (15:27-32), the rich man and the pauper (16:19-22), the faithful and unfaithful servants (12:35-39), the leper and his nine companions (17:17), the rich donors and the poor widow (21:1-2). Luke's opposition between the two thieves, then, is the climax in a lengthy series of contrasts.

Second, Luke's repentant thief is the final example of individuals who confess their guilt in the hope of obtaining divine mercy: the Publican in the Temple (18:13), the Prodigal Son (15:21), and the repentant woman (7:36-50). While in each of these examples the characters come to God with no justifying works of their own, this note is especially obvious in the thief on the cross, who turns to Jesus for mercy with literally no time left to do anything except repent, plead, and die.

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