

September 18, 2011

Sunday After Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Up front in every Orthodox parish church stands an icon called "Christ the Teacher." This fact suggests that "teacher" is one of most important images of our Christology.

This idea permeates the gospels. The Semitic expression "Rabbi" appears to have been a title most readily applied to Jesus during his public ministry. This usage is best preserved in John's Gospel, where "Rabbi" (or "Rabbouni," my Rabbi) is a standard way for people to address Jesus. The word essentially means "Teacher."

The first time John wrote "Rabbi," he made a point of translating it into Greek--*-didaskalos---*probably because not all his readers were familiar with the Semitic term. This was the early occasion when "two disciples heard [John the Baptist] speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?' They said to him, 'Rabbi (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), where are You staying?'" (1:37-38)

The equivalence of *Rabbi* and *Didaskalos* was likewise indicated in the first words Nicodemus spoke to Jesus: "*Rabbi*, we know that you are a *didaskalos* come from God" (3:2). John also provides the Greek translation of "Teacher," when Mary Magdalene calls Jesus "Rabbouni" (20:16). Sometimes John simply sticks with the Greek *Didaskalos*, instead of the Semitic word (8:4; 11:28; 13:13-14).

Mark preserves "Rabbi" or "Rabbouni" as a title by which the disciples addressed Jesus (9:5; 10:51; 11:21; and, alas, 14:45). More often, however, Mark simply gives the Greek noun (5:35; 14:14), especially in the case of direct address (4:38; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1).

In Luke (7:40; 8:49; 9:38; 10:25; 11:45; 12:13; 18:18; 19:39; 20:21, 28, 39; 21:7; 22:11) and---on the whole---in Matthew (8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36; 26:18), the Greek word for "Teacher" replaces the Semitic "Rabbi."

Thus, in one form or another---and constantly by implication---the first disciples thought of Jesus chiefly as "Teacher."

If his contemporaries were impressed that Jesus "taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29), we modern folk should observe that he does not teach, also, like the scientists, the political

philosophers, and the economists. Let me suggest, indeed, that if the teaching of Jesus is true, then there is something seriously wrong with the teaching of the scientists, the political philosophers, and the economists. I cite simple examples:

It has been a long time since I studied botany, but I do not recall a single botanical text urging me to "consider the lilies of the field" and compare their lot favorably with "Solomon in all his glory" (6:28-29). And, although I have studied rather little of ornithology, I suspect that few authorities on the subject of birds would support the thesis that the "heavenly Father feeds them" (6:26). Ornithologists are persuaded that birds feed themselves, and botanists rarely mention haberdashery in connection with plants. Science, when it comments on the nourishment of the one and the adornment of the other, treats birds and flowers under the heading of "survival."

If Jesus, as Teacher, is radically out of step with scientists, he is scarcely less so with political philosophers. Who among them, for instance, would accept the proposition that we must turn the second cheek to the assailant who strikes the first? (5:39). Name me one political philosopher who thinks we should love our enemies (5:44). Political philosophers will reject the teaching of Jesus for the same reason the scientists do---it is a matter of survival. Non-resistance is incompatible with survival.

Nor is the teaching of Jesus much in accord with economics. Several economic textbooks burden my shelves, but not one of them mentions the wisdom of donating my cloak to the man who absconds with my tunic (5:40). Once again, the economist thinks in terms of survival. Those devoid of cloaks and tunics don't do well in a hostile environment, any more than the bird that sits around waiting for a heavenly Father to feed him.

By the usual modern standards, in short, Jesus does not have much going for him. His teaching appeals to no obvious truths-truths that human wisdom would recognize by its own lights, truths that could stand without reference to Jesus.

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