

April 1, 2012

Sunday Before Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In every age since the Bible was written, the understanding of it has been colored by the assumptions readers carried with them when they opened its pages. In addition to theology, various sources have fed those assumptions, such as philosophy, historical study, and literary theory. Sometimes the assumptions have been helpful, sometimes not. Let us consider an example from the latter category.

During the past century, students of Holy Scripture became more keenly aware that much of the Bible contains layers of tradition. Close examination of the Book of Amos, for instance, detected evidence of a "process" in the development of the work, extending from the oracles of the prophet himself to the book's final form among the canonical Scriptures. This process represented a rhetorical and literary "tradition."

Students of the New Testament observed evidence of a similar phenomenon in the Four Gospels. They perceived that the deeds and words of Jesus underwent a process of development before their insertion in the final accounts of the Evangelists.

As I have described it up till now, there appears to be nothing wrong with this approach to Holy Scripture. In some instances, the supporting evidence is pretty obvious. Any careful reader may perceive, for instance, that Mark's first account of the Multiplication of the Loaves was colored by the Church's Eucharistic experience. This coloration is obvious from a simple comparison of Mark 6:41 and 14:22. So far, so good.

As it turned out, however, the investigation of "traditions" behind the biblical text was not without its problems. Note, for instance, the expression I just used: "the Church's Eucharistic experience." Observe the anonymity of the expression. This anonymity points to a possible problem.

A good number of those who adopted that approach to the biblical accounts took their cue from another discipline of the day: folklore theory.

A curious aspect of folklore studies during the past century was the presumption that folklore was necessarily anonymous---not anonymous in the sense that we didn't know who conceived this or that folk tale, but in the sense

that folk tales came from some anonymous "folk," not from real, individual storytellers. According to this theory, folktales are essentially social; they emerged from a society.

It is difficult to imagine how any rational person could entertain such a theory--and students of folklore have now discarded it---but during the previous century (and even, alas, among few diehards today) it served as a guide for the study of the Gospels.

According to that theory, the "tradition" between Jesus and the Gospel writers was entirely social and anonymous. It is as though the Apostles, the myrrh-bearing women, and the others who bore witness to Jesus suddenly fell silent for the next thirty years or so, in order to let the "Christian community" elaborate stories about what Jesus did and said. Anonymity was, apparently, the only condition for conveying these stories. No one with an actual name, apparently, was permitted to comment.

Those who adhered to that odd theory were rather dogmatic on the point. Thus, the anonymity of the Samaritan woman at the well was taken as a narrative canon, as it were, because the Evangelist did not give her name. This was assumed to be the norm.

Now if anonymity was the norm, what should be said about the instances when a real person was named as the witness of an event? For instance, what about Jairus? What about Nicodemus? In the Gospel stories, after all, these men appear to be authenticating witnesses.

Ah, declared the theorists, the explicit particularity of these individuals is a reason to distrust their inclusion in the stories. Clearly, Jairus and Nicodemus must have been added to the stories (by the Evangelists), pretty much the way "Hansel and Gretel" were later added to an ancient tale about a couple of anonymous children who discovered a gingerbread house in the woods.

Nowadays that strange theory, which was pretty standard back when I was a student, is mercifully discarded. In Gospel studies over the past couple of decades, more adequate attention is given to the authority of the witnessing Apostles, to whom the risen Lord transferred the twin tasks of pedagogy and doctrinal oversight. The early Church was not an assembly of unsupervised storytellers.

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