

April 8, 2012

Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

If we paint the subject with a large brush, we may be prompted to see two major kinds of Christology: Christ as Teacher and Christ as Savior.

It is no surprise that non-Christians prefer to concentrate on Christ as Teacher. This picture of Christ is attractive, not only to devout Hindus and Buddhists, but even to secular people, who are ethically serious.

Such folk find comfort and support, for example, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. They reason---not without cause---that world peace would certainly be attained if everyone simply turned the other cheek when offended and refused to return evil for evil. In this view, Jesus becomes a great teaching of universal morality.

My own thesis simple: The moral teaching of Jesus is inseparable from the person of Jesus. Apart from Jesus, there is no reason to take the moral teaching of Jesus seriously. Stating the thesis in another way, let me affirm that the Mount of the Beatitudes cannot be correctly understood apart from Mount Calvary.

Since both hills are presented in the Gospel of Matthew, we may examine the point as Matthew presents it. He portrays the Passion of Jesus as the consummate illustration of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon cannot be reduced to an abstract and idealistic ethical code. It must be understood in the way that Jesus modeled it in His Passion.

Perhaps the chief theme uniting the Passion and the Sermon on the Mount is that of the heavenly Father:

In the Sermon, the believer's regard for the heavenly Father is the determining principle of the moral life. His constant thought and remembrance is the heavenly Father.

In all things---whether in fasting, prayer, or almsgiving---he endeavors to please this Father, "who sees in secret" (6:4,6,18). It is in Him that the believer puts his entire trust, convinced that the heavenly Father knows his every need (6:8,32). It is the heavenly Father's glory that he seeks above all things (5:16).

The disciple's love for others is simply his endeavor to imitate the perfection of his Father in heaven (5:48). If he forgives, it is for the sake of being forgiven

by his Father in heaven (6:14-15). His sole interest is in doing the will of the heavenly Father (6:10; 7:21), to whom he prays (6:9; 7:11). He does all of these things for the purpose of being a child of the heavenly Father (5:45). He seeks his reward only from the Father in heaven (6:1).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' disciples were instructed on the blessedness of "those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (5:10) and suffer the pain of false accusations (5:11). He cautioned them against retaliation against evil and exhorted them not to resist those who use violence against them (5:38-42). He warned them against holding grudges against injuries (6:12,14).

>From the Mount of the Sermon, however, it is but a short step to the Mount of Golgotha, where Jesus exemplifies and illustrates his moral teachings.

Thus, when one of His disciples grabs a sword to resist those who came to arrest the Savior, Jesus immediately puts a stop to the violence, because "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (26:51-52).

Now, it is a fact that a preoccupation with the Father in heaven is exactly what we find in Matthew's description of Jesus' Passion. He is aware that the heavenly Father would answer his slightest wish to be supplied with twelve legions of angelic warriors, were he to request it (26:53). He will not request it, however, convinced that this is not the Father's will.

Resolved to live and die by the rules that he laid down in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus endures without complaint the manifold injuries and injustice inflicted upon him: the unwarranted arrest, the false witnesses, the accusation of blasphemy, the beatings, mockery, and insults, the scourging, the crowning with thorns, and the manifold sufferings of the Cross.

All these things are done in obedience to the Father. Indeed, the Greek text for "Thy will be done"---*genetheto to thelema Sou*---is identical in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:10) and the Agony in the Garden (26:42). In both cases this prayer is specifically addressed to the Father (6:9; 26:39,42).

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