

April 15, 2012

Pascha

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In St. Mark's version of the Passion and Death of Jesus the reader is struck by a double impression, the two sides of which may be described as realism and irony.

First, there is a strong component of realism, in which we are correct to see evidence of the Roman origin of Mark's Gospel. From earliest times, realism has been the identifying pattern of Roman iconography.

So many examples come to mind. I am thinking, for instance, of the mosaic images of Christ and the Apostles high in the apse---over the altar---of the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in the Roman Forum. Those mosaic figures have a singular firmness and physical density, different from what we expect in Byzantine iconography. They are of a piece with the firmness and compactness of the traditional Roman Liturgy.

A literary form of this density is what we perceive in the Gospel according to Mark. Particularly in Mark's account of the Passion, this realism takes on an aspect justly described as "brutal." Everything is sharp and painful; Mark curves no edges.

The quiet element of gentleness we find in the Passion accounts of Luke and John is quite missing in Mark. Mark gives us no equivalent of "Father, forgive them," no equivalent of "Woman, behold thy son," no equivalent of "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

In the Gospel of Matthew, the last recorded words of Jesus are "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me." In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' last recorded words are "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Mark portrays the Passion of Jesus as an unmitigated tragedy.

At some points Mark's portrayal is even shocking. Take, for instance, the removal of Jesus from the Cross. In the accounts of Matthew, Luke, and John, it is said that Pilate gave the "body" of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea---*soma*. In Mark's account, however, the word used is not "body," *soma*; it is *ptoma*, "cadaver." It has been suggested that Mark's Greek wording here is a translation of the Latin expression in Pilate's official order: *cadaver donavi*.

Second, Mark's account of the Passion features a striking amount of irony. Perhaps the clearest example is found in the mockery and humiliation inflicted on Jesus by the soldiers.

Mark's says, "Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'"

The first level of irony is what the soldiers themselves really intended. Emperors were often chosen by the army, after all, and they were greeted in words rather close to what Mark actually wrote, *Ave, Caesar!* That is to say, the impulse of the mockery itself was based on an intended irony.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem took note of this feature: "But the soldiers who surrounded Him, mock Him, and their Lord becomes a sport to them, and their Master is turned into jest by them. Yet there is the figure of kingly state; for though they mock, yet do they bend the knee. And the soldiers crucify Him, having first put on Him a purple robe, and they set a crown on His head; for what though it be of thorns? Every king is proclaimed by soldiers; it became Jesus too in a figure to have been crowned by soldiers" (*Catechetical Lectures* 13.17).

Beyond the historical irony intended by the soldiers, however, there is the literary and theological irony Mark conveys to his readers. The mocking soldiers do, in fact, bend their knees before the King. Their salutation of him is---as Mark and his readers know---theologically correct! Jesus is the true king, who just days before, as he entered Jerusalem in triumph, was addressed as David's son.

Mark and his readers understand vastly more than the soldiers, who are simply instruments of the righteous judgments of God. Mark and his readers know that the theological significance of this crown of thorns derives from a biblical understanding of it, not the intent of the mocking soldiers.

Mark knew, as do his readers in all ages, that the crown of Jesus was woven from the elements of Adam's curse: "Both thorns and thistles [the ground] shall bring forth for you" (Genesis 3:18). Even the irony is blunt and factual.

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