

December 9, 2012

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Two Miracles in Luke

Unique to the Gospel of St. Luke is his distinctive pairing of two particular miracle stories: the healing of the centurion's sick servant (Luke 7:1-10) and the raising of the widow's dead son (7:11-17). Before considering Luke's intent in this juxtaposition, a comment on each story may be in order.

First, the account of the centurion's servant is singular among New Testament narratives; it relates the only event in Jesus' public ministry reported by both Matthew and Luke but not by Mark.

Although readers usually assume that Matthew and Luke derived the story from some other common source, the greater detail and complexity of Luke's version makes this assumption less obvious to me. Unlike Matthew, Luke informs us that Jesus and the centurion did not actually meet; local synagogue leaders served as intermediaries. My own reading of Matthew suggests to me that this is exactly the kind of detail he would not have omitted if he knew about it. (Note, for instance, that Matthew alone tells us of the intervention of the wife of Zebedee on behalf of her sons; contrast Matthew 20:20-21 with Mark 10:35.)

Consequently, I suspect that Luke's story of the centurion's servant derived from a source other than the one known to Matthew. The details of it are so vivid, in fact, that one suspects the source was an eyewitness account---perhaps from the centurion, or the servant, or someone else involved in the event. Firsthand narratives are not uncommon in Luke.

Second, with respect to the raising of the widow's son, Luke is our only informant, and, once again, his graphic description suggests the testimony of an eyewitness---perhaps the widow herself. In short, the editorial narrative hand of Luke is unmistakable in these two stories. So, for what purpose does he pair them?

I believe the answer lies in the people's response at the end of the double account: "Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen up among us'; and, 'God has visited

His people” (Luke 7:16). That is to say, the witnesses testify to a prophetic, redemptive visitation (cf. Luke 1:68, 70, 78).

When---as Luke describes it---Jesus began his public ministry, he spoke of it as prophetic, declaring, “Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country.” (Contrast the narrative position of Luke 4:24 with Mark 6:4, Matthew 13:57, and John 4:44). Then, by way of illustrating how a prophet might be accepted *outside* his own country, Jesus recalled two narratives from prophetic history: “I tell you in truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath of Sidon, to a widowed woman. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian” (4:24-27).

Jesus’ explicit linking of his own ministry to that of Elijah and Elisha is, I believe, the key to Luke’s pairing of the stories about the centurion’s servant and the widow’s son. To wit:

First, in the instance of the sick servant, Jesus deals with the centurion entirely through intermediaries. This circumstance is identical to the case of Elisha, of whom we are told, “And Elisha sent a messenger to [Naaman], saying, ‘Go and wash in the Jordan seven times’” (2 Kings 5:10). Thus, Elisha and this sick “servant” of the King of Syria (cf. 5:4) never actually meet, even though the servant is healed.

Second, when Elijah restored to life the only son of the widow of Zarephath, the prophet “presented him to his mother” (1 Kings 17:23). It is significant that Luke adopts the Greek text of this passage word-for-word to describe what Jesus did in the case of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:15).

Thus, Luke’s juxtaposition of the two miracles, under the heading of prophetic visitation, serves a larger narrative purpose. When he placed the reference to the ancient stories of Elijah and Elisha at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, it was with a view to his later pairing of the accounts of the centurion’s servant and the widow’s son. Taken together, they testify that---in the “great prophet” who has arisen---most certainly “God has visited His people.”

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