

May 25, 2014

Sunday of the Man Born Blind

Father Pat' Pastoral Ponderings

Gospel Sequences

We already considered, at some length, that the Gospels are mainly composed of particular pericopes, discrete episodes, in the life of Jesus, and we further reflected that attention to these individual stories provides the structure of the Church's traditional lectionaries.

These observations should not be understood in an absolute sense, however, because it is often the case that the Evangelists have deliberately linked these discrete stories, in various ways, in order to highlight certain points within them. Sometimes this is accomplished with a measure of subtlety.

For instance the Evangelists not only juxtapose the incident of the Gadarene demoniac with the stilling of the storm on the lake, they also link the two stories thematically. Thus, when Jesus stills the storm the astonished Apostles ask, "Who is this?" Their query is answered just a few verses later, when the Gadarene demons inquire, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" Question posed, question answered.

Sometimes two Gospel stories placed in sequence serve to illustrate an irony. Long recognized as an example of this style is the juxtaposition of the Lord's Transfiguration on the mountain with his healing of the little boy at the base of the mountain. Perhaps the most famous use of this parallel is Rafael's portrait of the Transfiguration, where the bottom half of the canvas depicts the chaotic scene of the little boy and his distressed father, surrounded by the Apostles who are unable to help them.

Sometimes in the Gospels we find an abrupt transition of contrasting scenes to convey an irony fundamental to the Gospel itself. For example, strength made perfect in infirmity, or the wisdom revealed to the simple. Observe, for instance, the following sequence:

[Jesus says,] "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am

mEEK and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” At that time Jesus went through a field of grain on the Sabbath. His disciples, being hungry, began to pluck heads of grain and to eat (Matthew 11:28—12:1).

The first part of that transition comes at the end of what is arguably the loftiest, most spiritual section of Matthew’s Gospel. It began, “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to infants (nepioi) . . . . All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father” (11:25-27).

From that sublime height, including Jesus’ invitation to come to him, there is an abrupt declension to the mundane walking of hungry men through a sown field. This sequence illustrates the actual experience of the Christian life, the concrete existence in which “we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:11).

These Apostles, to whom the Son transmits the intimate knowledge of his Father, labor and are heavy laden in this world, confessing, “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (4:7).

Matthew heightens this contrast by commencing each scene with the same formula. Both aspects of the Christian life are revealed, he declares, en ekeino to kairo, “a that time.” This expression, used only twice in his Gospel, serves to bind these two complementary scenes:

First, there is the conveyance of the divine Mystery to the infants:

At that time Jesus answered and said, “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to infants (Matthew 11:25).

Second, there is the concrete earthly situation in which the Mystery is conveyed to those infants:

At that time Jesus went through a field of grain on the Sabbath. His disciples, being hungry, began to pluck heads of grain and to eat (12:1).

“That time,” therefore, refers to the Sabbath, symbolizing the “rest” Jesus gives to those who come to him and receive the revelation of the Father.

Matthew’s coupling of these two scenes is vital, inasmuch as the walking, the hungering, and the plucking of the grain illustrate what Jesus means when he speaks of those “heavy laden.” To such as hunger and labor in this world he promises an easy yoke and a “light” burden—that is to say, in rabbinical terms, a load that can be carried without violating the Sabbath rest.

This is the “rest for your souls” Jesus provides for those who come to him. It consists in the knowledge of the true God revealed in and through His Son. The true Sabbath, therefore, is the presence of Christ, who walks with his disciples through their field of hunger. Having become a human being in order to reveal the Father, he shares their condition in the field.

Matthew goes on to speak of the “wise and prudent” who accuse those infants when, on the Sabbath, they “began to pluck heads of grain.” “Look,” they tell Jesus, “Your disciples are doing something not lawful to do on the Sabbath!”

These accusers know nothing of the Sabbath rest. Rather, they “bind heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on men’s shoulders but will not, themselves, lift a finger to adjust them” (23:4). These are the “wise and prudent,” to whom the knowledge of the Father has not been revealed. For them the Sabbath itself is a burden.

The Lord of the Sabbath, the One promising “rest for your souls,” responds to their accusation, summoning to mind great David, who “entered the house of God and ate the Bread of the Presence, which was not legitimate for him to eat, nor for those who were with him” (12:4).

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