

April 14, 2002  
Saint John of the Ladder

#### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Except for the Passion narratives, it is not often that several consecutive gospel stories are told in the identical order in all or even several of the gospels. Indeed, apart from events that obviously belong near either the beginning or the end of Jesus' earthly life, factual chronology seems not to have been of great concern to the four evangelists, and the differing positions and juxtapositions of individual stories within their gospels seem determined less by a care for historical precision than by the literary and theological considerations that guided their minds. (Early in the second century Papias of Hierapolis already remarked on this feature in the Gospel according to St. Mark.)

Consequently, when we find four consecutive stories told in exactly the same order in three of the gospels, the fact is noteworthy. Indeed, in such a case we are justified in suspecting that the sequence of the narrative was determined by very early tradition, perhaps even the historical memory established by an apostolic eye-witness.

We have such an instance in the order of the following four stories: the stilling of the storm, the driving of the demons into the pigs, the healing of the woman with the blood-flow, and the raising of Jairus's daughter. These accounts appear in each of the three Synoptic Gospels in exactly the same sequence.

The likelihood of strict chronological precision is even stronger in the sequence of the storm scene and the episode involving the demons and the pigs. Since the latter event was remembered to have taken place in Gentile territory (Jews not being permitted to tend pigs) on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, we naturally find it preceded by a boat trip to arrive at the place. Beyond simple historical sequence, however, the two narratives are appropriately juxtaposed for two other reasons.

First, both stories are concerned with the mysterious identity of Jesus in a context symbolic of Baptism. First, the marveling apostles raise the question of Jesus' identity in reaction to His manifest authority over the storm (Matthew 8:27; Mark 4:41; Luke 8:25), and then the demons address Him

as "Son of God" (Matthew 8:29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28): "Who is this? The Son of God." This combination of query and response, found in all three Synoptics, suggests that the demons themselves are answering the question that the apostles have just asked. The joining of this specific doctrinal question and this specific dogmatic answer, given at the waterside, follows the ancient interrogation of the sacrament of Baptism (cf. Acts 8:36 for example), which in the Church has always been prefaced by an exorcism.

Second, the juxtaposition of these two stories suggests an imaginative analogy between the outer, physical storm on the lake and the inner, spiritual storm afflicting a tortured soul. (This suggestion is not at all affected by Matthew's having two demoniacs here, apparently moving the second one to this scene from Mark 1:23-26. Such doublings are typical of Matthew.)

Both storms have a "before and after." Thus, of the first one we read, "a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat," and then, "the wind ceased and there was a great calm." Of the second storm we are told, "he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones," and then, they "saw the one who had been demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind" (Mark 4:37,39; 5:5,15). In both cases, it is the encounter with Jesus that produces the calm. In each instance, Jesus' command is inexorable: "Even the wind and sea obey Him" and "Send us into the swine" (4:41; 5:12).

Prior to meeting Jesus, this poor demoniac is the very type of the lost soul, his heart and mind fractured and fragmented into thousands of warring parts. (There were six-thousand foot soldiers in a Roman legion, besides cavalry. Now, if six thousand demons entered into two thousand pigs, that would mean . . . well, you can do the math.) This meeting with Christ is baptismal; the demons perish in those same deluge waters from which the Church has just been delivered.

More specifically that raging demoniac, living in Gentile territory, represented the hopeless plight of the uncovenanted Gentiles described by St. Paul, "without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world"; (Ephesians 2:12). Prior to meeting Christ in the mystery of Baptism, he was day and night dwelling in tomb caves, the realm of the dead, breaking iron chains with his bare hands, crying out in despair and gashing himself in anguish; it was

truly the case that "he saw Jesus from afar" (makrothen --Mark 5:6). Indeed, from very far, and without hope. But even to such as him was St. Paul able to write, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off (makran) have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).

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