

April 27, 2003

Pascha

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Pharisee Nicodemus, "a ruler of the Jews" and "a teacher of Israel," appears only twice in the New Testament, each time in St. John's gospel, once near the beginning and again near the end, framing the gospel as it were. A strong component in the context of both appearances of Nicodemus is the redemptive death of Jesus on the cross.

First, it was to Nicodemus, His visitor by night, that Jesus made His earliest explicit reference to His coming crucifixion: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (3:14-16).

After this discourse on the mystery of the cross, we do not hear of Nicodemus again until immediately after the death of Jesus, who was, at last, "lifted up" on Golgotha. In this second instance, Nicodemus appears as the companion of Joseph of Arimathea, assisting him in the Lord's burial: "And Nicodemus, who at the first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury" (19:39-40).

The expression "be lifted up," used by our Lord in His discourse with Nicodemus, is repeated halfway through John's gospel, again with reference to the crucifixion: "'And I, if I am *lifted up* from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.' This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (12:32-33). In addition to being a reference to the crucifixion, the expression, "lifted up," also alludes to a prophecy of God's Suffering Servant: "Behold, My Servant will prosper; He shall be *lifted up* and glorified exceedingly" (Isaiah 52:13). As this text makes clear, the Lord's *lifting up* refers not only to His crucifixion but also to His exaltation in glory.

In this respect it is useful to compare the Lord's words to Nicodemus, as recorded in John, to the predictions He makes

about His coming sufferings, as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. It is noteworthy that what Jesus proclaims to His closest disciples in the Synoptics, He proclaims to the Pharisee Nicodemus in John. We may take Mark 8:31 as an example. In the Markan text, as in John, the defining verb is "must" (*dei*), which refers to God's determined plan of redemption. In each text also, Jesus calls Himself "the Son of Man." Thus, in Mark 8:31, "the *Son of Man must* suffer many things . . . and be killed and after three days rise again," while in John 3:14, "the *Son of Man must* be lifted up." If these verses are to be regarded as theological equivalents (which seems reasonable), Mark's inclusion of the resurrection among the things that *must* happen suggests that John's "lifted up" includes the Lord's glorification as well as His crucifixion.

In John's theological vision the Lord's glorification is manifest even in His mounting of the cross. His very death is an assertion of His authority: "I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (10:17-18).

It is in discoursing with Nicodemus, then, that Jesus first calls Himself "the Son of Man" and refers to the necessity of His sacrificial death. We do not know the immediate response of Nicodemus, but the Lord's words finally smite this Pharisee's heart when he sees them being fulfilled on Golgotha.

John's account of the Lord's sufferings stresses that Jesus died as a king (18:36-37; 19:2,15,19,21), and Nicodemus certainly witnessed the death of a king. Whereas all the gospels credit Joseph of Arimathea with the burial of Jesus, John tells us that it was Nicodemus who determined that Jesus would be buried as a king. First, Jesus would be laid to rest in a garden (19:41), like His royal ancestors, the ancient kings of Judah (2 Kings 21:18,26). Then, to the ministry of properly burying this King of the Jews, the now converted Nicodemus would bring a kingly measure of myrrh and precious spices, about a hundred pounds. This burial garden was, after all, the King's garden of which Holy Church says, "My Beloved has gone to His garden, to the beds of spices" (Song of Solomon 6:2). It is on this "mountain of myrrh" that He will lie in rest "until the day breaks and the shadows flee away" (4:6).

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