

July 27, 2003
St. Panteleimon

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

After the first half of the Gospel of Mark climaxes with Simon Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (8:29), there immediately commences the dominating theme of the gospel's second half, the way of the Cross. This second half of Mark manifestly breaks into two parts. First, a narrative section (8:30-10:52) structured around the Lord's three prophecies of His coming Passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). Second, a detailed account of the last week of Jesus' earthly life (Chapters 11-16).

The first part of Mark's second half is structured geographically, inasmuch as each of the three aforesaid prophecies takes place in a location ever nearer to Jerusalem, where the final part of Mark takes place. These three prophecies are given in Caesarea Philippi (8:27), Capernaum in Galilee (9:30,33), and the neighborhood of Jericho (10:46), each of them progressively closer to Jerusalem. The importance of this journey to Jerusalem is emphasized by Mark's sustained use of the word "way" or "road" (*hodos* in Greek, the root of our English word "odometer") all through this section (cf. 8:27; 9:33f; 10:17,32,46,52). Each of these Markan passages may be contrasted, in this respect, to their parallels in Matthew and Luke, where, except for Matthew 20:30 and Luke 18:36 (corresponding to Mark 10:46), the word *hodos* is not found. This textual fact indicates clearly that we are dealing with a special Markan accent on the "way" of the Cross. It is a Markan word.

In Mark's narrative, moreover, each of Jesus' three predictions of His Passion is met by some completely inappropriate response on the part of His disciples. In the first case, Simon Peter answers the Lord by declaring the whole idea of the cross to be unacceptable: "Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him" (8:31). In the second instance, Mark comments that the disciples "did not understand this saying and were afraid to ask Him" (9:32,33). They begin, instead, immediately to dispute "among themselves who would be the greatest" (9:34)! By way of response to the Lord's third prophecy of His Passion, "James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, 'Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask'" (10:35). Each time Jesus speaks of His coming suffering and death, the disciples fail Him miserably.

In all three examples, that is to say, the Lord's preaching about the necessity of the Cross falls on various sorts of infertile soil. The first seed falls "beside the way (*para ten hodon*). . . . Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that is sown in their hearts" (4:15). Such is the case of Simon Peter, who flatly refuses to hear the word of the Cross. Satan takes it from his heart. Thus, Jesus addresses him, "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (8:33).

In the second case, the seed "fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth" (4:5). This is the instance exemplified by the disciples who, when they heard the word of the Cross, promptly began to argue among themselves for preeminence (9:33-34), illustrating how, "when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, they immediately stumble" (4:17).

In the third case, the "seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it" (4:7). This reception of the word is illustrated by James and John who respond to the word of the Cross by asking Jesus if they may sit on either side of Him in His glory (10:37). Their spirit of ambition and self-aggrandizement corresponds to "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things" (4:19).

In short, the disciples of Jesus are still men of the world, mindful of the things of men and not the things of God. They are still self-centered and ambitious. To counter this "apostolic resistance" to His message of suffering and death, then, Jesus three times preaches a more elaborate sermon on "the word of the Cross," on the necessity of taking up the Cross and its shame (8:34-38), on the imitation of the Suffering Servant by becoming the servant of all (9:35; 10:42-45), and on the commitment to live by the standard of the Cross implicit in the ordinances of Baptism and Holy Communion (10:38-40).

At the end of this section of Mark, and just prior to the Lord's entrance into Jerusalem to suffer and die (11:1), we meet blind Bartimaeus, who sits "beside the way (*para ten hodon*)" and is given sight by Jesus. This new sight enables Bartimaeus to do what the other disciples have all along resisted doing: "And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the way (*en te hodo*)" (10:46-52). Bartimaeus thus represents the true disciple who follows Jesus

on the way of the Cross. At last the seed of God's word falls
on good ground and bears fruit (4:8,20).

©2003 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php