

January 4, 2004

The Sunday Before Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Two mountain scenes in Matthew's gospel are studied best, I believe, when studied together: the mountain where Jesus is tempted (4:8) and that on which He commissions the Apostles (28:16).

First, there is the mountain of the Lord's temptation. Matthew's account of Jesus' three temptations places the mountain scene last in the series, making it the climax of his whole temptation narrative: "Again, the devil took Him up on an exceeding high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, 'All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me'" (Mt 4:8-9).

It is instructive to contrast Matthew with Luke with respect to the order in which those temptations appear. In Luke's temptation narrative the climactic third place is occupied by the scene, not on the mountain, but at the temple in Jerusalem: "Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here'" (Lk 4:9).

Why this difference of sequence between Matthew and Luke? On the presumption that both evangelists relied on a common source for their temptation stories, it is really quite impossible to say which one changed the original order of the temptations, because a special propriety attends the literary setting of that third temptation in each version. We may look at Luke and Matthew individually in this respect.

Luke's placing the Lord's third temptation on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem (4:9) is consistent with his usual pattern of making Jerusalem generally, and the temple in particular, the place of climax. Thus, Luke both begins and ends his gospel in the temple (1:9; 24:53). Not only does he treat the whole public ministry of Jesus as a journey to Jerusalem (cf. 9:31,51,53), he also makes the temple itself the culminating point of his infancy narrative (2:27,41-46). It is hardly surprising, then, that Luke's temptation story also culminates at the temple. It may seem, then, that Luke's arrangement of the temptation story was specifically crafted to fit this general pattern of his gospel. This is a reasonable inference.

On the other hand, a closer look at Matthew may prompt us to think that it was he, not Luke, who made the change in the temptation sequence. What would prompt Matthew to choose the mountain for the culminating temptation?

Adequately to address this question, let us go to the final mountain scene in Matthew, that Galilean mountain where the Lord commissions the apostles. Just as Luke's gospel ends in the temple, Matthew's ends on the mountain. That is to say, in both cases, the gospels end exactly where the temptation sequences had ended: Luke at the temple, Matthew on the mountain. The internal consistency of each narrative could hardly be more striking.

In the case of Matthew, this consistency prompts a further comparison of his first and final mountain scenes. On Matthew's first mountain, as we observed, the temptation has to do with "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory." The Lord rejects the temptation to political power, in which Satan pledges to give Him "all these things."

Now it is remarkable that these same nations also appear on Matthew's final mountain, where the Lord sends out His Apostles with the mandate to "make disciples of all the nations" (28:19). In the first instance, Satan offers universal

political power to Jesus. In the second, Jesus commissions the Apostles to a universal ministry founded in His own authority as the Son of Man prophesied by Daniel: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." Jesus' reception of this universal authority from God is thus contrasted with Satan's earlier offer of a universal gift of "the kingdoms of the earth and their glory."

Likewise, on both of these mountains there is a summons to worship. On the first mountain Satan calls on Jesus to "fall down and worship [proskyneses]" him (Mt 4:9), and on the last mountain the eleven apostles worship (prosekynesan) Jesus (28:17). Thus, the rejection of the worship of Satan leads at length to the worship of Jesus.

The other mountains in Matthew are positioned between these first and last: the Sermon on the Mount (5:1; 8:1), the mountain of Jesus' prayer (14:23), the other mountain of His teaching and healing (15:29), the mountain of the Transfiguration (17:1,9), and the Mount of Olives on which He begins His passion (21:1; 24:3; 26:30). These mountains are all embraced within the ministry of Jesus, which begins with "all the kingdoms of the world" in thralldom to Satan and ends with the apostolic commission to "make disciples of all the nations." These two mountains frame Jesus' whole ministry.

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