

March 28, 2004

Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In all three of the Synoptic Gospels the parable of the wicked vine growers is found in a series of controversy stories involving Jesus and His enemies just a few days before His arrest (Matthew 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-18).

Moreover, each of these accounts ends with the evangelist's comment that this parable provided the provocation determining the resolve of the Lord's enemies to kill Him (Matthew 21:46; 26:3-4; Mark 12:12; 14:1-2; Luke 20:19; 22:1-2).

It was obvious to those enemies, after all, that in this parable Jesus was giving His own interpretation of the entire history of the Chosen People. He was claiming that the vine growers, the Jewish leaders, had repeatedly rejected God's messengers, the prophets, and now were about culminate that dolorous history in a resolve to murder God's very Son.

After speaking of Himself as the "Son" in this parable, Jesus went on to call Himself the "stone" of Psalms 117 (118):22. In this transition of titles we detect, resonating through the Greek text, a nuance of the Semitic original. Jesus was employing, in fact, a play on words, the Hebrew word for "son" being *ben*, and the word for "stone" being *eben*. The immediate tension of that very dramatic moment, then, is preserved in this subtlety just below the surface of the canonical text.

God's choice of the rejected "stone" to become the chief stone of the building is important to the Lord's own interpretation of His parable, because it refers to the final vindication following His murder at the hands of the vine growers. It is a prophecy, that is to say, of His coming Resurrection, and in Mark's account it corresponds to the Lord's unvarying prediction of His Resurrection after each prediction of His Passion (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34). The Resurrection motif of Psalm 117 (118) is recognized by the Church's traditional liturgical use thereof at normal Sunday Matins and in various

services of Pascha.

Jesus identified Himself as the Son, and, as Son, the "heir" of the vineyard. Indeed, within the Gospels this parable is the only place where the word "heir" (*kleronomos*) is to be found. Jesus is the heir of the vineyard precisely because He is the Son. Indeed, in the parable this is the very reason He is killed. His murder represents the attempt of the vine growers to usurp the lordship of the vineyard.

This association of sonship and inheritance, affirmed by the Apostle Paul (cf. Romans 8:17; Galatians 4:7), is one of the striking points of contact between this Gospel parable and the Epistle to the Hebrews. The latter work begins, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners, spake in times past to the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his *Son*, whom he hath appointed *heir* of all things"(1:1-2 KJV).

Furthermore, the historical perspective of the prologue of Hebrews is identical to that of the parable of the vine growers. In both cases the sending of the Son comes as the climax of a lengthy series of diverse missions dispatched to the vineyard. The former sending of the "prophets" in Hebrews corresponds to the repeated efforts of the Lord of the vineyard to gain the attention of the vine growers, who rejected the messengers, "beating some and killing some" (Mark 12:5).

In both places there is an emphasis on how often God made those overtures. The first three words in Hebrews, *polymeros kai polytropos*, are better rendered with some attention to the repeated prefix *poly-*, which indicates "many." The "at many times and in many ways" of the English Standard Version accomplishes this. The sense of repetition is also found in the Gospel parable. Several servants are sent, indeed "many" (*pollous* -Mark 12:5), even "more than the first" (*pleionas ton proton* -Matthew 21:36).

In this historical sequence, the Son comes "last" (*eschatos*). Mark's version (12:6) reads, "*Last* of all He sent His beloved Son" (*hyion agapeton . . . apesteilen auton eschaton*). Hebrews, likewise, says that God "has in these last days (*ep' eschatou ton hemeron touton*) spoken to us by a Son (*en hyio*)." Thus, the sending of the

Son, both in the Gospel parable and in Hebrews, is God's eschatological act (cf. also Galatians 4:4), bringing Old Testament history to a dramatic climax in the Son's redemptive Death and Resurrection.

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