

July 25, 2004

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Alone among the evangelists, St. John informs us that "standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (19:25-27).

It is significant that in this description of the scene at the Cross, John identifies Mary solely as "the mother of Jesus." I want to suggest that her maternal relationship to Jesus is theologically important in the context of John's emphasis on Jesus' kingship, particularly in connection with His Passion.

Many readers have noted the lengths to which John goes in order to stress that Jesus died as a king. Unlike the other evangelists, John shows how Jesus' claim to kingship was made a major component of his trial before Pilate (18:33,36-37). The Roman soldiers mocked Jesus with the words, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (19:2) At the last it was Jesus' assertion of his kingship that became the decisive charge leading directly to his condemnation (19:12-15). Although the other gospels do speak of the sign over Jesus' cross identifying him as "King of the Jews," only in John does this designation become a point of controversy between Pilate and Jesus' accusers (John 19:18-22), thereby drawing more explicit attention to it. In John's account Jesus was even buried in a garden (19:41), like His royal ancestors, the covenanted kings of Judah (2 Kings 21:18,26). Jesus' cross, then, is inseparable from his kingship.

Now it is in connection with Jesus' kingship on the cross that John speaks of "the mother of Jesus" (19:25). In placing this designation of Mary in this context of kingship, John summons to mind the biblical tradition of the queen mother, an ancient institution that readily explains John's reference here. Biblical kings sometimes had numerous wives, but only one mother, and she was a person of considerable prestige and power. Described as wearing a crown (Jeremiah 13:18) in the royal court (22:26; 29:2), the king's mother, the *gebirah*, was regarded with considerable reverence by his subjects.

To gain a proper sense of the difference between a biblical king's wife and his mother, one need only compare two scenes found close together in the First Book of Kings. In the first of those scenes, Bathsheba "bowed down and did homage" to her husband David (1:16); in the second, however, her son Solomon "rose up to meet her and bowed down to her, and sat on his throne and had a throne set for the king's

mother; so she sat at his right hand" (2:19). The difference between the two cases is nothing short of dramatic, and it affords a glimpse into the depths of John's apparently simple expression, "the mother of Jesus."

That special regard for the queen mother was most conspicuous, in fact, in the line of the covenanted Davidic kings, Solomon being the first. In this respect we observe that in the New Testament accounts of the Passion Jesus is not called the "King of Israel," but more specifically "the King of the Jews." It is the royal house of Judah that is envisaged.

We grasp the further significance of this reference when we reflect that in all but two instances the Books of Kings explicitly give the names of the mothers of the kings of Judah, in striking contrast to the uncovenanted kings of Israel. These queen mothers of Judah are singled out in the Bible with a particular attention and deference.

John's simple reference to "the mother of Jesus," then, evokes this ancient institution of Judah's royalty. When the hour arrives for Judah's final King to be identified (even "labeled," if the word is allowed) upon the throne of the Cross, John is the only one of the evangelists to speak of the King's mother standing beside it (19:26). Mary correctly takes her place as the last of the *gebiroth* of Judah, the mother of its definitive King.

Finally, we may note that John's scene on Calvary, which alone records the presence of Jesus' mother and "the disciple whom He loved," absolutely dominates traditional Christian art of the crucifixion. When figures are portrayed as mourning at the foot of the Cross, these figures are invariably the ones listed in John's Gospel.

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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
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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