

April 23, 2006

## The Resurrection of our Lord

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Gospels describe how our Lord's enemies, during the last week of His earthly life, came to Him, day by day (Mark 11:12,20,27; 14:1,12; 15:1), in order to test and challenge Him, group by group, in hopes of discovering some viable charge on which they could put Him to death. Matthew says that Jesus was approached in this way by the chief priests (21:15,23,45), the scribes (21:15), the elders (21:23), the Pharisees (21:45; 22:15,35,41), the Herodians (22:15), and the Sadducees (22:23). At the end of these menacing encounters, "no one dared to ask Him any more questions" (22:46 NIV).

The question put to Jesus by the Sadducees, a fanciful supposition that challenged the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, is particularly curious, in the sense that it is the most "theoretical" question in the series. Placed within the long succession of hostile engagements, it shares in the drama of the context as a whole, but if we look at it separately, it lacks the sense of immediacy of the other stories in the sequence. For example, on the part of the Sadducees the story mentions no explicit indications of personal animosity and malicious intent. In this respect this account may be contrasted with other parts of the sequence (for instance, Matthew 21:23,45; 22:15,35). Except for Matthew's comment--and his alone--that the meeting with the Sadducees happened "on that day" (*en ekeine te hemera*--22:23), this story could fit into almost any period of our Lord's public life.

Three special points of interest may be noted about Jesus' encounter with the Sadducees.

First, their question introduces the theme of the resurrection from the dead, a doctrine that they denied. When the Sadducees raise this question on the very threshold of the Lord's Passion, the incident serves the literary and theological purpose of the evangelists themselves, because all the Gospels culminate in the Lord's resurrection from the dead.

Second, in Matthew's narrative this story of the Sadducees is the first of three that are concerned with the interpretation of specific texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. It deals with Exodus 3:6,15, the account of the burning bush (Matthew 22:32). The second instance is about the true meaning of the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-39; Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12; 30:6; Leviticus 19:18), and the third deals with the interpretation of a line in the Psalter (Matthew 22:44-45; Psalms 110 [109]:1). The confrontation series thus ends with Jesus as interpreter of the Bible.

The theme of biblical interpretation, which Matthew elaborates here, is far from incidental to his interest. Throughout his Gospel Matthew repeatedly emphasizes, as a dominant motif, the fulfillment of Holy Scripture in Jesus' deeds and the circumstances of His life (1:22-23; 2:5-6,15,17-18,23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 26:54,56; 27:9-10). Truly, Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets pertains to the very spine of Matthew's work. Hence, it is significant that the evangelist finishes his long series of confrontation stories with three accounts of Jesus interpreting Holy Scripture. Jesus interprets Holy Scripture, because He fulfills Holy Scripture.

Third, it is most striking that Jesus invokes the revelation at the burning bush in order to argue for the resurrection of the dead. When God spoke to Moses on that occasion, says our Lord, He called Himself "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Since, however, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living," Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive, not dead.

With respect to this argument Matthew remarks that "when the multitudes heard it, they were astonished at His teaching." And just why, I am prompted to ask, were they astonished?

Surely the reasoning itself did not astonish them. Those multitudes, being the ardent students of logic they doubtless were, recognized right away the validity of Jesus' reasoning. In form, mood, and figure, they perceived that it was a straightforward *Datissi* syllogism: First, God is the God only of the living; Second, God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; *ergo*, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are living. Surely no one in that crowd of Palestinian Jews, sound students of logic every man jack of them, would have quarreled with Jesus' argument.

If there was nothing wrong with Jesus' logic, then, why were the people "astonished at His teaching"? Let me suggest that they were perhaps astonished for the same reason that biblical scholars have been astonished ever since. Jesus was demonstrating the doctrine of the resurrection in a biblical passage where no one had ever before, or since, thought to look for it--in the story of the burning bush. Indeed, were it not for the word of Jesus, would any reader of Exodus, at any time before or since, have thought of finding the doctrine of the resurrection in the story of the burning bush? Evidently Jesus perceived a great deal more in the burning bush than Moses did, and this is the point of the story.

What Matthew calls Jesus' "teaching" (*didache*) at this point is obviously more than an exercise in logic. It is even more than an exercise in biblical interpretation. In fact, if anyone but Jesus had sought to do what Jesus does in this case, we would probably find the exercise somewhat disconcerting and a bit of a stretch.

What Jesus does in this story of the burning bush is not what we usually call exegesis. Our Lord reads the passage from the inside, as it were. He identifies

the Speaker and draws an important inference from that identification. He knows the intention and power (*dynamis*-Matthew 22:29) of the One who speaks. When Jesus argues, then, for His interpretation of the thesis enunciated from the burning bush, the assent of our minds has as much to do with our trust in Jesus as with our faith in logic.

Jesus appeals to logic, because He is the *Logos*, both the true Meaning of the Sacred Text and the very Foundation of the gift of reason. Our minds, in following His words, are not asked to assent to something unreasonable, but as the present instance demonstrates, our reliance on Jesus in faith permits us to explore both logic and the Bible in a way we would never have attempted on our own.

All of this, says Jesus, was revealed in the burning bush. With regard to His understanding of that event, I think there are two further points to be mentioned.

First, Jesus does not read the Scriptures as other people do. He reads them from within, because He is their fulfillment. His understanding of the Bible comes from His own identification with its deepest meaning. He is the allegory (Galatians 4:24), the type (1 Corinthians 10:6) concealed below the surface of the Sacred Text. In the story of the burning bush Jesus recognizes His own voice, for it was He that spoke to Moses, and He knows what He meant.

Second, Jesus' understanding of the burning bush story points to the mystery of the Exodus itself, of which the account of the burning bush is the introduction. Israel's deliverance from Egypt was the foreshadowing and prophecy of the definitive liberation of God's people from servitude to death. The God who performed the first will also accomplish the second--and that very soon--precisely because He is "the God of the living."

©2006 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](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
**Pastoral Ponderings:**  
[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)