

December 24, 2006

Christmas Eve

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

A special historical problem attends the Gospel accounts of our Lord's Nativity, but the correct solution to that problem, I believe, offers a unique perspective on those narratives. This subject is easily understood and very much worth the pursuit. We will look first at the problem, and then consider its solution.

The problem, as I remarked, is historical. We may put it simply: Just where did Matthew and Luke find the historical material that fills the first two chapters of each of those Gospels?

The significance of this question will be obvious if we examine the content of the earliest apostolic preaching. It is not a hard task to demonstrate that that preaching was based on a defined narrative structure, which invariably began with the ministry of John the Baptist. It contained nothing pertinent to the Lord's conception, birth, and childhood.

We discern the structure of that early apostolic preaching in the Acts of the Apostles. Thus, when St. Peter began to evangelize Cornelius and his friends at Caesarea, he commenced by speaking of the ministry of John (10:36-37). He went directly from John to Jesus; there was nothing mentioned about Jesus prior to His baptism by John.

The same is true of St. Paul's evangelization of Pisidian Antioch. To speak of Jesus, Paul began by linking Him directly to the ministry of John. He included not one word of Jesus' life prior to that time (13:23-25). That is to say, the "evangelical narrative," the story form in which the Gospel was proclaimed, embraced the ministry of Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist. It contained no information about the earlier years of Jesus, or about His conception and birth.

Now this is exactly what we should expect from a close inspection of the directive that Peter gave to the assembled Apostles prior to the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When they determined to choose some person to take the place of Judas Iscariot to fill up the number of the Twelve Witnesses, Peter specified the time period concerning which that chosen person would have to bear witness. He must be selected, said Peter, from among "these men who have accompanied us all the time that

the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, *beginning from the baptism by John* to the day that He was taken up from us" (1:21-22). That period of time, beginning with John's ministry, defined the specified limits of the original apostolic narrative, the primitive story structure of the Gospel.

Two of the Gospel writers adhere rather strictly to these specified time limits. Thus, Mark begins his Gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist (1:2-3). Even the evangelist John, whose first words take us up to the eternity of the Word's relation to the Father (1:1-5), commences the story of Jesus' life on earth by introducing John the Baptist. Even before declaring that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," John proclaims, "there was a man sent forth from God whose name was John." He goes on to describe the Baptist's ministry at some length (1:6-40). He moves directly from John to Jesus. Neither Mark nor John mentions a single detail about Jesus' life from an earlier period.

In short, then, the inherited story structure of the first apostolic witness began the story of Jesus' life at the point of the preaching of John the Baptist. That apostolic witness seems to have contained not a single detail about Jesus prior to the Baptist's appearance at the Jordan. Matthew and Luke, consequently, in order to lengthen the Gospel story to include accounts of Jesus' conception, birth, and early life, had available no pertinent material from the earliest apostolic preaching. As far as we can tell, no one had ever preached on such material.

Therefore, this is the historical problem: just where did Matthew and Luke obtain the narrative material that fills the first two chapters of each Gospel? What source was available to them?

The only reasonable answer, it seems to me, is Jesus' own mother, of whom we are told, "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19,51). Luke is obviously disclosing his source here. Mary alone was still alive to remember, years later, those details no longer known anyone else. She is surely the living witness of the precious stories about herself and Joseph, the conception and birth of John the Baptist, her own virginal conception, the manger in the stable, the swaddling clothes, the angels and the shepherds, the Magi and their gifts, the Lord's circumcision, the presentation in the Temple, Simeon and Anna, and the dramatic event that occurred when Jesus was twelve years old.

Matthew and Luke differ greatly between themselves with respect to details and their differing literary and theological interests, but they tell essentially

the same story, and it was a story they could have learned from only one source.

Consequently, to read their Christmas stories even today is to enter into a mother's contemplative heart where those stories were preserved until they were written down in the Gospels under the inerrant guidance of the Holy Spirit. Holy Church, in order to proclaim this earlier part of Jesus' life, draws us into the immaculate heart of Mary, to share in her inner faith and contemplative vigilance, to understand Christmas as she understood it.

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