

March 18, 2007

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The teaching of Jesus was inseparable from His person. In the Gospel we do not find our Lord appealing to universally available religious truths, truths that could stand on their own, truths accessible to man's mind apart from His teaching of them, truths that could outlive the person who spoke them. It is essential to grasp this fact, because it indicates an essential difference between Jesus and other "religious founders."

To illustrate this difference we may take the example of Siddhartha Gautama some six centuries earlier. When Gautama gathered his disciples to listen to his Deer Park Sermon, he certainly appealed to his own experience of a "revelation." He referred to his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and expounded to his followers the meaning of that experience. He defined Dependent Causation and explained how to be delivered from it.

Some historians of comparative religion are of the opinion that this is essentially what Jesus did. Although they recognize a difference in the objective content of the two efforts, they imagine that the Deer Park Sermon and the Sermon on the Mount have this in common--that both preachers were simply expounding their religious theories. According to this view, the difference between a Christian and a Buddhist would result solely from the decision about which religious teacher was believed to have "gotten it right."

The problem here is that neither Gautama nor Jesus would agree with this assessment of the matter.

With respect to Gautama, it is important to observe that he never thought of himself as essential to his own message. Indeed, he made a point of saying that his religious experience was available to anyone who followed in his footsteps. He asked no one to take his teaching on faith. He never claimed to have discovered truths otherwise unavailable for discovery. He asked no one to believe in him as the exclusive channel of his teaching.

On the contrary, Gautama was persuaded that the Four Noble Truths would be just as true if he had never discovered them. What he had to say about the Chain of Causation would be just as valid, he believed, if he had never mentioned it. Gautama claimed to teach truths independent of himself and

transcendent to his teaching of them. In short, Gautama never claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life.

When we look at Jesus, we are faced with something radically different. All that heard Him recognized that He taught as "One having authority." Jesus expounded no truths transcendent to Himself. What He taught was otherwise unknowable and inaccessible.

Indeed, how would we know that we have a heavenly Father who loves and cares for us, except on the testimony of Jesus? Is that an obvious or otherwise available truth? Again, if Jesus had not mentioned the fact, how would we know that the very hairs of our head are all numbered? Is it really self-evident, after all, that God has even the slightest regard for every sparrow that falls? Or that a loving Father clothes in beauty the flowers of the field? We know these things for one reason only--that Jesus told us so.

Thus, the religious message of Jesus is inseparable from the authority of His own person, His own "I." This "I" is central to His message and permeates the whole of it. The essential feature to note about Jesus' teaching is that it is founded on the proclamation, "But I say to you." This "I" is the foundational component of the message, because Our Lord's doctrine stands or falls with Himself. Jesus not only taught us that we have a Father in heaven, but He also claimed to be, in His own person, the sole access to that Father.

This inseparability of Jesus and His teaching was, I submit, a major part of the crisis of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. While His dead body lay in the tomb, none of what He said could stand on its own. The authority that Jesus had claimed, to all human appearance, died with Him. If death were the last word about Jesus' life, the Sermon on the Mount would be nothing but religious theory or plain old make-believe.

This was part of the crisis of the Cross. The teaching of Jesus, as well as the faith of those who believed that teaching, seemed radically discredited by the event of Calvary. The Apostle Paul perceived this clearly when he wrote that if Christ was not raised, we of all men are the most to be pitied.

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