

April 1, 2007

Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In his description of the death of Jesus, Saint John is the only Gospel-writer to include the detail that "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (19:34).

Although the evangelist does not name this soldier, Christian legend calls him "St. Longinus," a name that one suspects is corrupted from *logke* (pronounced "lonki"), the Greek word for "spear." A small feature of art history lends weight to this suspicion. A Syriac manuscript preserved at the Laurentine Library at Florence contains an illumination, by an artist named Rabulas, which depicts the death of Jesus on the cross. It includes the figure of the soldier in question, over whose head, in Greek letters, is inscribed the name "Loginos." This appears to be the immediate source for the Latin name "Longinus."

This manuscript illumination, which is safely dated to the year 586, is contemporary with our first records of the presence and veneration of the spear itself at Jerusalem. The later fortunes of that spear are also somewhat documented. The point of the spear, we know, found its way to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. After the crusaders' sack of that city in 1204, it was taken to France, where it was enshrined, along with what was believed to be the Lord's crown of thorns, in the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. It disappeared in the chaos that followed the French Revolution.

The larger portion of the spear, which seems to have been remained at Jerusalem long after being deprived of its point, eventually found its way to Constantinople, apparently after the Fourth Crusade. What the Crusaders had started, however, the Turks finished. The shaft part of the spear fell into the hands of the conquering Turks in 1453. These, in turn, as part of a later arrangement with the pope (who happened to have in his control a person that the Turks very much wanted released) sent that longer part of the spear to Rome in 1492. It is preserved to this day in St. Peter's Basilica, behind an enormous statue of St. Longinus, sculpted by Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

Various kings over the centuries, Athelstan and Charlemagne among them, have claimed to have at least a part of that venerable spear, but these claims seem less reliable.

Given such exotic legends about his spear, it is not surprising that Longinus himself became the subject of legend. For example, according to *The Golden Legend* of James of Voragine in the 13th century, the blood and water from the side of Jesus cured Longinus of poor eyesight. That same work goes on at some length to describe the martyrdom of Longinus in Cappadocia, and to this day the church of St. Augustine in Rome claims to hold his relics.

What these latter stories have in common, of course, is their assumption that Longinus was converted to the Christian faith in the context of what he did to the body of Jesus on the cross. This assumption, which is scarcely unreasonable, was surely related to the fact that the deed of Longinus was done as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. It was in this detail that St. John saw enacted the words of ancient Zechariah, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced." Thus, in opening the side of the crucified Jesus--in cleaving for all of us the Rock of ages--Longinus opened likewise the deep fountain of Holy Scripture.

Perhaps we may say, as well, that he opened the wellsprings of divine grace, inasmuch as the blood and the water, in which Longinus was the very first person to be bathed, have long been understood in the Christian Church to symbolize the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. It was this double flood of redemption that the Roman soldier brought forth to pour upon the earth. It was his spear that found its way into that source of infinite love which is the heart of Christ.

It is through Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, after all, that believers are united to the mystery of the Cross. They are buried with Him in Baptism (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12), and as often as they eat this bread and drink this cup, they proclaim the Lord's death till He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). These two ordinances of the Church, summoned forth by the mystic spear of Longinus, make effective to believers the redemptive power of the Cross.

Thus, through the mystery of divine providence, the *coup de grace* given by a Roman executioner to a condemned criminal is transformed, by way of symbol, into a sort of sacerdotal act; it takes on the hieratic significance of a liturgical rite. It is certain that the Church sees it this way, something that is obvious in the prescribed rite preparatory to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. As the priest cuts into the bread that is to become the Body of the Lord, the Church's rubric requires him to recite the appropriate verse of John: "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out." We may note, in addition, that an image the spear of Longinus is customarily stamped on the loaf designated for the Holy Eucharist.

In short, Longinus, in opening the side of Christ, provided a path of faith, furnished a place for the hand of Thomas--along with the rest of us. It was of this wound inflicted by Longinus that Jesus says, "reach your hand, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

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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

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

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