

July 15, 2007

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although Matthew's account of the Lord's Transfiguration seems at first to differ only slightly from that of Mark, closer inspection of its details, especially considered in the light of Matthew as a whole, shows a very different presentation of the event.

I want to open this inspection with what may first appear to be an unimportant difference—namely, in Matthew's narrative Simon Peter does not address Jesus as "Rabbi" (as in Mark), but as "Lord"—*Kyrie* (17:4). Let me suggest two ways in which this change is significant.

First, it conforms to a pattern found all through Matthew, who avoids the title "Rabbi" with respect to Jesus. While Jesus was surely called "Rabbi" ("teacher) during His earthly time with the apostles, and although we do find Him addressed this way in Mark and John (never in Luke), Matthew is more circumspect in his use of this title. Indeed, in Matthew the only person to address Jesus with the Semitic title "Rabbi" is Judas Iscariot, and then only in the context of the Passion (26:25,49). Matthew's consistent usage here is probably related to Jesus' injunction not to use the title "Rabbi" among Christians (23:8). Thus, when Jesus is addressed as "teacher" in Matthew, it is always through the Greek word *didaskalos* (8:19; 12:18; 19:16,24,36). This is likewise the title by which Jesus refers to Himself (26:18). Here in the Transfiguration scene Matthew avoids the term "teacher" altogether.

This brings me to my second consideration: In this scene Jesus is vastly more than a teacher. He is the "Lord," *ho Kyrios*, the name signifying the Church's fully articulated faith in the risen Christ. As *Kyrios*, Jesus is the object of worship, and Matthew describes the Transfiguration as a scene of worship, which is why Jesus is addressed in His full, post-Resurrection title (Acts 2:36; Philippians 2:11).

This theological intent is the key to understanding other features in Matthew's portrayal of the Transfiguration. For example, the posture of the apostles. Only in Matthew's account do we read, "And when the disciples heard [the voice from the cloud], they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid." (17:6). This is an important detail, because throughout Matthew this full prostration is the proper Christian response to the revelation of God's Son.

Indeed, this is a distinguishing characteristic of Matthew's Gospel, where the life of Jesus begins and ends with believers prostrate before Him (2: 11; 28: 17). Only in Matthew is prostration in the presence of Jesus described with respect to the leper (8: 2), Jairus (9: 18), the apostles in the boat (14: 33), the Canaanite woman (15: 25), the wife of Zebedee (20: 20), and the myrrh-bearing women at the empty tomb (28: 9).

Here in the Transfiguration, as the Church's affirmation of the divinity of Jesus, such prostration fittingly responds to the voice that proclaims, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (17: 6). When the apostles respond to this proclamation by falling down in reverence, the whole Church prostrates with them. In Matthew these are not Jews on their faces before Jesus; they are Christians, who recognize the truth proclaimed by the voice from the cloud.

This intent also explains Matthew's omission of Mark's comment that Peter "did not know what to say" (Mark 9: 6). His omission here is consistent with Matthew's sustained emphasis on "understanding" as a component of the Christian life. For this reason Matthew rather habitually leaves out Mark's references to a lack of understanding on the part of the apostles (for instance, Mark 6: 52; 9: 10, 32).

This preoccupation also explains why Matthew leaves out Jesus' questions found in Mark (4: 13): "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" The parable in question is, of course, the parable of the sown seed, and it is significant that Matthew alone refers to "understanding" in connection with that parable: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart" (13: 19; contrast with Mark 4: 15).

Corresponding to this, at the end of the parable, Matthew writes, "But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (13: 23; contrast with Mark 4: 20). Finally, at the end of the series of parables, Matthew writes, "Jesus said to them, 'Have you understood all these things?' They said to Him, Yes, Lord" (13: 51; no parallel in Mark). True discipleship, that is to say, includes understanding.

It is no surprise, then, that in his portrayal of the transfigured Christ, Matthew will include no suggestion that the apostles failed to understand the meaning of the event. They are, after all, Christians who are prostrate in worship, in response to the Father's voice.

Finally, Matthew alone mentions the gentle detail that "Jesus came and touched them and said, 'Arise, and do not be afraid'" (17:7). Here we are presented with another component of the Christians' relationship to the transfigured Son of God—intimacy. The disciples are not only prostrate in fear; they are reassured in faith. This combination of transcendence and communion pertains to Matthew's understanding of the Transfiguration, in which he portrays the response of the Church to God's glorious revelation of His Son.

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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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