

November 11, 2007

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Three times the New Testament describes encounters with Jesus that took place at noon: His meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:6), His confrontation with Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 26:13), and His revelation to Peter at Joppa (Acts 10:9). These three scenes bear noteworthy resemblance to one another, I believe, well beyond the circumstance that they all occurred at the noon hour.

First, in each case, it is clear that these scenes are based on the personal testimony of the one whom Jesus encountered. It was of the nature of these meetings that only an actual witness could convey the stories to others. For instance, we know that Peter, when he returned to Jerusalem just a "few days" later (Acts 10:48), shared with the other apostles what he had recently seen and heard at Joppa (11:4-10). In his description of that event, Peter clearly believed that the "voice" addressing him (10:13,15; 11:7,9) was that of Jesus; he answered by calling Him "Lord" (10:14; 11:8), the name that Peter uses to address Jesus in Luke's Gospel (5:8; 12:41).

In the case of the encounter on the road to Damascus, we are told that Saul described that scene at least three times: to the apostles at Jerusalem (9:27), to a violent mob at the temple some years later (22:1-21), and at his trial before Agrippa (26:12-18). Although Saul's companions apparently saw a light of some sort (22:9; 26:13), it is not clear that they actually heard the message that he received (contrast 9:7 and 22:9). In any case, the newly converted Saul was the only credible witness.

With respect to the Samaritan woman's meeting with Jesus, John tells us, "And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all that I ever did'" (John 4:39). No one else was present at that encounter.

A second similarity flows from the first: Although the circumstances of each revelation were private, the significance of these events themselves was far from private. Each story became a message for everyone. This is why these accounts passed into the shared inheritance of the Church and thence into the New Testament.

Third, the sharing of these stories pertained to an important dimension of the Gospel, namely, its expansion beyond the boundaries of Judaism. These are *catholic stories*, in the sense that they speak to the universal imperative of the Christian proclamation.

Thus, our Lord's encounter with the woman at Jacob's well becomes the opportunity for sharing the Good News with the Samaritans, that ancient

people who formed a historical bridge from the Jews to the other nations--"in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Consequently, it was in the context of that personal encounter at the well that Jesus spoke of the great evangelical gathering: "Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:35).

Next, the Lord's encounter with Saul prepared directly for the mission to the Gentiles. In the second of the three narratives of this event in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus says to Saul, "I will send you far from here to the Gentiles" (22:21). This commission is greatly expanded in the third description, where Jesus says, "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me" (26:16-18).

Finally, in the revelation that he received on the rooftop at Joppa, the Apostle Peter recognized the divine authorization to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. It leads directly to his evangelizing and baptizing the friends of Cornelius at Caesarea (10:34-48) and his defense of that ministry to the inquirers in Jerusalem (11:1-18).

Thus, the high, blazing sun of the noon hour, which served as the setting for all three of these revelations, assumes a richer symbolism, telling of the illumination of the nations through the ministry of the Apostles and by the bright light of the Gospel.

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