

November 25, 2007

The Second Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

There was a time when it was fashionable to treat Jesus as a benign teacher of general religious theory, a Semitic humanist of sorts, marked by a preference for pacifism, tolerance, and sustained inclusivity. According to this thesis, Jesus' general religious interest, not His specific relationship to the history of the Jews, accounted for the universal appeal of His message. Those who adhered to this theory, if they were distressed by the harsh things that occasionally escaped Jesus' lips, were also quick to point out that the sole objects of His censure were narrow-minded religious bigots. His blessing of the children was the favorite biblical scene of the folks who held this view, and "Let's everybody try to get along and be nice to each other" was their summary of His message.

Some of the folks in this group were honest enough to recognize that their interpretation of Jesus bore but scant resemblance to the picture of Him presented in the Gospels. This dissimilarity, they explained, came from misrepresentation in the Gospels themselves. Thus, in 1901 Wilhelm Wrede contended that the Gospels, starting with Mark (long presumed to be the earliest), were essentially works of fiction, in which the figure of the historical Jesus was distorted to serve the diverse apologetic and theological purposes of the Gospel writers. This lost figure was now recovered by the enlightened views of modern biblical exegesis.

Although this understanding of Jesus and the Gospels is still alive in some quarters, it was solidly answered five years after Wrede, I believe, when Albert Schweitzer demonstrated the impossibility of removing the person of Jesus from the dominant religious preoccupation in the Palestine of His day, the apocalyptic understanding of contemporary history. This apocalyptic reading of history was already leading to those revolutionary movements that would end in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans about a generation after Jesus. He was emphatically part of that contemporary picture, not a detached or detachable religious thinker.

Although apocalyptic themes, such as the definitive judgment of history, are not found extensively throughout the teaching of Jesus (exceptions include the parables of the wheat tares in Matthew 13:24-30,36-43 and the dragnet in 13:47-50), they do appear strongly in the sermons that the Gospel writers place during the last week of Jesus' earthly life (Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21; but cf. Luke 17:20-37).

An initial question comes to mind with respect to this apocalyptic material--namely, what determined its narrative disposition? That is to say, why does this material immediately precede the Passion story in all three of the Synoptic Gospels?

It is impossible, I think, to answer this question with complete assurance, but two answers suggest themselves.

First, it may be the case that this sequence (apocalyptic/Passion) first appeared in the Gospels themselves or in the Church's preaching prior to the composition of the Gospels. That is to say, it is possible that all or most of Jesus' eschatological sayings were lumped into this pre-Passion sequence for a homiletic or catechetical intent, in much the same way that the parables of the Kingdom were lumped together in the Sermon by the Lake (Mark 4, Matthew 13), or the lost-and-found parables were joined in a single context proper to Luke (Luke 15). If this is the case, the eschatological discourses of Jesus appeared together last in the public teaching of Jesus simply because they came last in the logic of His preaching. These discourses are concerned with "the last things," *de novissimis*. They would appear last in the Gospels for the same reason that they appear last in standard outlines of systematic theology.

There would be nothing disturbing, surely, if this were the case. After all, as early as Papias of Hierapolis in the second century, Christians have recognized that the narrative and didactic sequences in the Gospels were sometimes established, not by a concern for chronological precision, but by homiletic, catechetical and literary considerations (cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* 3.39.15).

Second, this sequence of eschatology/Passion may simply reflect the memory of the first Christians, which found its way into the Gospels. This latter suggestion I find more appealing, frankly, because it shows greater respect for the detailed, day-by-day sequence of Holy Week, especially pronounced in Mark and Matthew (and our Orthodox lectionary). Moreover, it would be hypercritical to insist that the Gospel writers *never* entertained a regard for chronological precision, especially in those instances where they deliberately made it a component of their narrative structure. If this point is granted, it is logical to accept as historical the Synoptic Gospels' eschatology/Passion sequence.

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