

December 9, 2007

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When God's Son assumed the form of flesh and entered history, a kind of logic called for His life to assume the form of letters and to enter historiography. The four Gospels were literary extensions, as it were, of the Incarnation.

Indeed, St. Bonaventure regarded the writing of the Gospels as so "logical" that exactly four of them were necessary, he said, because they were applications of Aristotle's Four Causes (*In Lucam*, Preface 22)!

That sequence did not come at once, of course, and we are able to trace certain steps in the process. Oral transmission came first. The story of Jesus, before it was recorded on parchment, was told by word of mouth, as we see in the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles (10:36-37; 13:23-25).

St. Mark's work was the decisive point, apparently, where the proclaimed Gospel was transformed into a written narrative. Indeed, an indication of this transition is the fact that the chronological limits of Mark's account are identical to those in the apostolic sermons, namely, "all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism by John to the day that He was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21-22). Mark began with John's baptism and ended with the empty tomb.

In addition, there were early testimonies linking Mark's Gospel directly to the apostolic preaching. Papias of Hierapolis, about A.D. 140, quoted an anonymous elder who called Mark the "interpreter of Peter" (Eusebius, *History* 3.39.15), a description repeated within a generation by both the Roman *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* and Irenaeus of Lyons (*Adversus Haereses* 3.1.2).

The testimony of Papias is particularly instructive, because it lists in detail the implications of Mark's relationship to the preaching of Peter. He tells us that Mark "did not compose an orderly account of the things concerning the Lord." Mark left out nothing of what Peter had remembered, insisted Papias, and he wrote nothing untrue. Still, Mark composed with "the needs of his readers" in mind, as did Peter in his preaching. It was the written expression of a homiletic impulse.

Now not for a minute, let me say, do I think this description of Papias does justice to the literary merits of Mark. I cite it only because it clearly points to the oral transmission of his material and its sermonic setting. Mark's narrative reflected, and was closely tied to, the Gospel as preached. It was not yet historiography in the sense of a work studiously researched and set out in a

critically constructed sequence. Mark was, rather, the point of transition when preaching became literature.

With regard to Matthew (who is significantly named after Mark in Eusebius), the testimony of Papias is shorter, but it still reflects the same setting. He tells us simply that Matthew arranged "the sayings" (*ta logia*) of Jesus (Eusebius, 3.39.16).

As in the case of Mark, let me mention that Matthew's literary accomplishment seems to me much subtler and far more complex than the description of Papias indicates. I cite it only as testimony that in Matthew we do not yet have a closely researched historical study of the subject. Both Mark and Matthew were developments in that direction, however, steps moving from preaching toward historical literature in a stricter sense.

Among the Evangelists, it is in Luke that we first meet a historian, in the full sense of someone who explicitly and consciously thought of himself as "doing" history. In the first prologue affixed to his double work, Luke described his enterprise in exactly this way, saying, "it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account" (Luke 1:3).

Aware that he was about to do something different, Luke spoke of the earlier efforts of those who had "taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us." Of this group, which certainly included Mark, Luke was not critical, because they too had relied on "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (1:1-2). Nonetheless, Luke was aware he was embarking on a venture new to Christian literature, and I believe a close, critical study of his work will show what he had in mind to do.

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