

March 16, 2008
The Sunday of Orthodoxy

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Matthew's description of the Passion of our Lord seems to me the consummate illustration of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The particulars of this demonstration are clear and unmistakable, leaving no doubt about Matthew's intention. We may consider these particulars in two respects, one formal, and the other material.

First, there is the heavenly Father. In the teaching of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, the believer's consciousness of the heavenly Father is the formal, determining principle of the moral life. The disciple's constant thought and remembrance is the heavenly Father. In all things—whether in fasting, prayer, or almsgiving—he endeavors to please this Father, “who sees in secret” (6:4,6,18). It is in Him that the believer puts his entire trust, convinced that the heavenly Father knows his every need (6:8,32). It is the heavenly Father's glory that he seeks above all things (5:16). The disciple's love for others is simply his endeavor to imitate the perfection of his Father in heaven (5:48). If he forgives, it is for the sake of being forgiven by his Father in heaven (6:14-15). His sole interest is in doing the will of the heavenly Father (6:10; 7:21), to whom he prays (6:9; 7:11). He does all of these things for the purpose of being a son of the heavenly Father (5:45). He seeks his reward only from the Father in heaven (6:1).

Such a preoccupation with the Father in heaven is exactly what we find in Matthew's description of our Lord's Passion. Jesus is aware that the heavenly Father would answer His slightest wish to be supplied with twelve legions of angelic warriors, were He to request it (26:53). He will not request it, however, convinced that this is not the Father's will.

Indeed, the resolve to do the will of His Father is obviously what most deeply moves and strengthens Jesus in the Passion. Having instructed His disciples, in the Sermon on the Mount, to pray that the Father's will should be done on earth as it is in heaven, Jesus models this petition when He prays at the beginning of the Passion. Three times, Matthew tells us (26:44), Jesus makes the same prayer: “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (26:39,42). Indeed, the Greek text for “Thy will be done”—*genetheto to thelema Sou*—is identical in the Sermon on the Mount (6:10) and the Agony in the Garden (26:42). In both cases this prayer is specifically addressed to the Father (6:9; 26:39,42). Thus, the prayer of Jesus in His Passion exemplifies the prayer given in the Sermon on the Mount. In the conscious intention of His Passion our Lord illustrates the formal moral principle of the Sermon on the Mount.

Second, Jesus in His Passion demonstrates also the material moral content of that Sermon. In that Sermon He instructed His disciples on the blessedness of “those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake” (5:10) and suffer the pain of false accusations (5:11). He warned them against retaliation against evil and exhorted them not to resist those who use violence against them (5:38-42). He cautioned them against holding grudges against injuries (6:12,14).

In His Passion Jesus best illustrates these components of His moral teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. When one of His disciples grabs a sword to resist those who came to arrest Jesus,

Jesus immediately puts a stop to the violence, because “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (26:51-52). Resolved to live and die by the rules that He laid down in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus endures without complaint the manifold injuries and injustice inflicted upon Him: the unwarranted arrest, the false witnesses, the accusation of blasphemy, the beatings, mockery, and insults, the scourging, the crowning with thorns, and the manifold sufferings of the Cross.

The moral teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, if it is not to be reduced to an abstract and idealistic ethical code, must be understood and interpreted in the way that Jesus modeled it in His Passion. It is imperative that those resolved to follow the Sermon on the Mount be conscious that nothing less is involved than the mystery of the Cross, in which God’s Son gave Himself in selfless obedience to the will of the heavenly Father. From the Mount of the Sermon it is a short step to the Mount of Golgotha.

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