

March 30, 2008
Holy Cross Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the story of Jesus' betrayer was well known in the Christian Church, the details of the betrayer's death seem to have received less attention. We have only Matthew (27:3-10) and Luke (Acts 1:18-19). While there are elements common to their two stories---the purchase of a field, for instance, and the fulfillment of biblical prophecy---their significant differences indicate that each author followed certain oral traditions apparently unknown to the other.

These two authors, in addition to their reliance on varying traditions, also place the narrative of Judas's death in very different contexts. Luke's interest is ecclesiological: he tells the story in connection with the choice of Matthias to replace the fallen apostle (Acts 1:15-26). Matthew's concern is Christological: he places Judas's death within the account of Jesus' trial before Pilate. Only Matthew, in addition, describes the death of Judas as a suicide. It is solely with his account that we are concerned here.

Matthew's version of the story, which is more complex, is strategically situated in the long narrative of Jesus' Passion. Just as Matthew uses Peter's threefold denial (26:57-75) to frame Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, so he inserts the suicide of Judas within the framework of Jesus' trial before Pilate (27:1-14). This double literary arrangement permits the author to accomplish several purposes.

First, it moves the story along by a variety of narrative scenes: it begins with the arrest of Jesus, then goes to Peter, comes back to Jesus, goes to Peter again, returns to Jesus, goes to Judas, and finally returns to Jesus. Both Peter and Judas are thus folded into the Passion account.

Second, by joining a specific disciple to each of Jesus' trials (before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate), Matthew indicates a concern for discipleship within the Passion narrative. The drama of the Cross is not isolated from the trial, struggle, and trauma of the human soul. That is to say, what transpires in the salvation wrought by God in Jesus' Passion and Death finds a resonating correspondence in the struggle of failure and repentance, treachery and despair. The conflicting lines of the Cross are reflected in the inner contests of two sinful disciples: Peter and Judas.

Thus, by placing the suicide of Judas a bare five verses after the repentance of Peter, Matthew encourages his readers to contrast these two souls as radically different types of response to sin and redemption. In fact, Christians over the centuries have followed Matthew's encouragement in this respect.

Third, this arrangement permits Matthew to compare Judas and Pilate. Each of these pitiful men recognizes the innocence of Jesus (27:4,18,23-24), but both of them finally refuse the path of responsibility and repentance. Both men, likewise, "play God," assuming an unwarranted authority over a human life, and in each man the reader recognizes the profile of a coward.

Thus, in pronouncing Jesus "innocent" (*athōos*), Judas prepares for the self-assessment of Pilate, who somehow recognizes that he, too, is on trial: "I am innocent [*athōos*] of the blood of this person" (27:5,24). When Pilate goes on to tell the Jews, "You see to it" (*hymeis opsesthe*), he simply pluralizes what the chief priests told Judas: "You see to it" (*sy opse*). There is irresponsibility all around.

Fourth, by placing the suicide of Judas immediately before Pilate's question, "Are You the King of the Jews?" (27:11), Matthew is able to evoke a striking parallel and prefiguration from the Old Testament: Second Samuel 16-18 tells the story of Absalom's rebellion against David, and in the course of that narrative David is betrayed by one of his closest associates, Ahitophel, who joins a conspiracy to overthrow Israel's true king. The betrayals of Ahitophel and Judas---their conspiracies against Israel's rightful king---are strikingly similar. The two betrayers are also matched in the manner of their deaths: suicide by hanging (2 Kings 17:23; Matthew 27:5). As Christ the King is the true heir of David, then, Judas is the new Ahitophel. Among the four Evangelists, Matthew is alone in using the sequence of his narrative to summon the remembrance of that historical correspondence.

Judas Iscariot, finally, despairing of God's mercy, returns to the temple, where the clinking of his rolling silver coins continues to resound, these two thousand years, to summon sinners back from the peril of despair.

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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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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