

April 13, 2008
The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Once Pilate hands Jesus over for death, all discussion stops, and the tragedy starts to run its course. Indeed, it runs so quickly that details of enormous significance are barely mentioned.

For example, Mark (15:15) and Matthew (27:26) reduce the scourging of Jesus to a single participle—"having scourged Jesus," *phragellosas*. The evangelists all knew what this expression meant, as did their first readers, but clearly they were not disposed to elaborate the subject. Did they find the sufferings of Jesus---His scourging in particular---too distressing to dwell on?

One suspects this was the case. In addition to the participle used by Mark and Matthew, all four gospels use another verb, *mastigo*, to speak of the Lord's scourging, and they use it eight times (Mark 10:34; Matthew 10:17; 20:19; 23:34; Luke 18:33; John 19:1). The evangelists repeatedly make the point, but in each case they make it briefly and with restraint, avoiding the painful details.

In this respect we may contrast the evangelists with David and Isaiah. The Psalter and the second part of the Book of Isaiah dwell lovingly on every wound in the Savior's body. Unlike the four evangelists, these two sources saw the Passion from a greater distance, so to speak; when the four gospels were written, those sacred wounds were still very fresh in the minds of Christians. It must have been, to many Christians, simply unbearable to think about them.

After all, the evangelists and their first readers knew exactly what was entailed in those brief references to the scourging, especially when that form of torture accompanied a death sentence. In that context there were no limits to the number of strokes or the ingenuity of the soldiers to inflict greater damage. Sometimes the beatings were so severe that the prisoners did not survive them. Indeed, the copious bleeding served to hasten a death on the cross. In this respect, we observe that the Lord's two crucified companions outlived him, and one can make the case that the immediate cause of Jesus' death was exsanguination.

If they were reluctant to describe the Lord's scourging in detail, however, the four evangelists showed no corresponding disinclination when describing His mockery by the soldiers. In Mark, Matthew, and John this mockery was particularly expressed in Jesus' supposed claims to kingship: He was mocked as "King of the Jews." In the use of this epithet, we should think of something close to "King of the Fools" in a medieval pageant. We should see in it the contempt those Gentiles felt toward Jews generally, a contempt they were eager to pour out on this one Jew abandoned by

His people. This same contempt for the Jews was expressed in the inscription Pilate caused to be affixed over Jesus' head on the cross. Suffering specifically as a Jew, Jesus became the supreme victim of anti-Semitism.

Jesus' true claim to the Davidic kingship renders the scene of the mockery supremely ironical. The mocking soldiers do, in fact, bend their knees before the King. Their salutation of Him is, as the evangelists and their readers know, theologically correct. Jesus is the same Man who just days before was addressed as David's son.

In this mockery Jesus was clothed in a scarlet or purple garment, likely a military cloak, to mimic royalty. To adorn His head, the soldiers weaved a crown of thorns, which served as a form of torture as well as a point of shame.

Once again---as in the case of the Jews calling down on themselves the blood of Jesus---the theological significance of this crown of thorns comes from the evangelists' understanding of it, not the intent of the soldiers. The Gospel writers knew, as do their readers in all ages, that the crown of Jesus was woven from the elements of Adam's curse: "Both thorns and thistles [the ground] shall bring forth for you" (Genesis 3:18). Wearing those thorns, Jesus bears that curse.

According to John (19:5), Jesus still wore the robe and the thorny crown when He appeared before the crowd, and He was still wearing them as that crowd shouted, "Crucify Him!" Although the robe was removed after the mockery (Matthew 27:31), no evangelist says that the crown was taken off. Christian art and hymnography commonly portray the crucified Christ as still wearing that crown under the sign identifying Him as "King of the Jews."

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