

October 19, 2008

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of the Bible's most shocking pronouncements is, I think, "Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things" (Matthew 21:27; Mark 11:33; Luke 20:8). Those words are truly shocking, because they declared a virtual sentence of damnation on those to whom they were addressed. In effect, Jesus was refusing to discuss with them the source of His own authority---God. To appreciate the gravity of His refusal, we may look more closely at its context.

In all three Synoptic Gospels, immediately after His purging of the Temple, Jesus was queried by the Temple leaders, by what authority He did it. Instead of answering them, Jesus proposed a counter-question, which at first seemed to have nothing to do with their inquiry: "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: Where was the baptism of John from? From heaven or from men?"

When His adversaries declined to answer this counter-question, Jesus replied, "Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things." It would be easy to regard the Lord's words here as a ploy, a smooth way of eluding a sensitive matter that He was not disposed to discuss. This is not the case. Jesus was not the least bashful about addressing the source of His authority. His refusal to take up their question, rather, recognized their final closing of a massive moral door: He was declaring that His questioners could not be taken seriously, and He would not again address their consciences. There was nothing more to say. They would, in short, perish in their sin.

Truly, the Almighty does not close the door of the conscience. He simply sees that the door of the conscience has finally been locked from the inside, and He recognizes the futility of continuing to knock on it.

To understand this recognition, we should observe the discussion of the Lord's adversaries among themselves with respect to the origin of John's baptism: "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." What is remarkable about this discussion is that the correct answer to the Lord's question---"where was the baptism of John from? From heaven or from men?"---was of not the slightest interest to these men. Indeed, their sole concern was to avoid considering the question!

Their discussion on the point, therefore, did not deal with the truth of the question, but only with the dilemma of a double hypothesis. They reasoned: "If we say A, then B. If we say C, then D. But since the inferences B and D are alike distasteful to us, we shall refrain from affirming either A or C. Rather, we shall plead ignorance." And this is, in effect, what they did. They answered Jesus, "We do not know."

Their affectation of ignorance, therefore, was more than an artful ruse to avoid answering the question about John's baptism. In fact, they had not the slightest concern about John's baptism, because quite simply they were not the least bit interested in the truth. Truth meant nothing to them. Their professed agnosticism was but a cover for their moral failure to consider the claims of truth. St. Augustine commented on this scene, "They closed themselves in, by denying they knew what they knew"---*negando se scire quod noverant*.

St. John tells us that, before sending the Light of His eternal Word into the world, the Father first sent forth a man named John, to bear witness to the Light. This is one of the senses in which John was a "forerunner": He addressed the human conscience with prophetic testimony to the Light. How men received John was to be the first test of their reception to the Light, when that Light should appear. Those unable to take seriously the testimony of John the Baptist would never be ready to consider the claims of the Light. By refusing to assess the message of John, they proved their incapacity to receive the Light.

"Fearful of stoning," wrote Augustine, "but more fearful of confessing the truth, they answered the truth with a lie" (*Tractatus in Joannem* 2.9). And this was the burden of Jesus' response to them: "Neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things." That is to say, "If you pretend ignorance to cover your contempt for the truth, why should I bother to tell you the truth? Remain where you are. I really have nothing further to tell you."

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