

October 26, 2008

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Occasional visitors to the Eastern Orthodox Church---including no few registered members of that body---have been known to lament the many references to the Jews in the texts of the regular worship, inasmuch as those references tend to be uniformly negative. Orthodox hymnography does not have very much good to say about the Jews. For example, the Troparion of the first tone, which is sung at least every other month, proclaims that the tomb of Jesus "was sealed by the Jews." One especially observes this phenomenon during Holy Week.

This trait of Orthodox worship is a source of embarrassment to certain members of the Orthodox Church, especially those "occasional visitors" mentioned above, and in response to this embarrassment our modernizing liturgical reformers have begun "adjusting" the offending passages.

For example, the Greek Archdiocese has published a service book for Holy Week in which all such references have been removed. Well . . . almost. The service book in question is bi-lingual, with Greek and English on opposing pages. The offending texts are excised only from the English pages, so if you want to refer to the Jews during the Holy Week worship, you are forced to do it in Greek.

I confess, after more than two decades worshipping in the Orthodox Church, I have never felt the slightest trouble with these liturgical texts. I am troubled, rather, by the embarrassment some Orthodox Christians feel about them. The notion that these liturgical hymns are inspired by racial or ethnic prejudice strikes me as downright silly. Indeed, in their references to the "Jews," I am unable to detect how these liturgical texts differ, even faintly, from the same references in the New Testament.

In this regard, I propose to treat briefly of the Gospel of John, where the word "Jew" appears rather often. Indeed, very often! We find the word five times each in Matthew and Luke, and six in Mark, but sixty-eight times in John. In the vast majority of these cases, moreover, the references are negative in tone.

Now it is quite remarkable to find so many references to the "Jews" in a work where nearly every person mentioned is, by blood, a Jew. Why keep mentioning the Jews, when it is obvious that just about everybody in the story (Pontius Pilate and a few others being the rare exceptions) is a Jew?

A hypothetical parallel may serve to emphasize this point. Suppose, for a moment, that Mark Twain, in chronicling the adventures of Huckleberry Finn, had designated as "Americans" all the various folks that made life rough for the hero of that noble work. It would seem a bit odd, inasmuch as nearly every character in that chronicle is an American. We would have to suspect that Twain used the term in some other and unusual sense.

Similarly, John does not use the word "Jew" in the usual ethnic or racial sense. It normally serves, rather, as a technical term to designate a certain group of Jesus' contemporaries who set themselves against Him. The term refers to a religious, not an ethnic, group.

John's Gospel reflects that period of history when the Christian Church was coming of age. Christians were no longer part of the Synagogue. They had become, in fact, "un-synagogued"---*aposynagogos*---a word that appears only in John (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Consequently, it was normal for Christians to refer to the "Jews" as the group that had expelled them, even though the very ones expelled from the Synagogue were also---as an ethnic designation---Jews!

The New Testament goes to some length to argue that that tragic alienation between Jew and Christian was a matter decided by the Synagogue, not by the Church. The Acts of the Apostles testifies repeatedly that separate Christian congregations around the Mediiterranian Basin were established when those who confessed Jesus as Messiah were no longer welcome in the local communities of Jews. Since this designation originally came from those who were ethnically Jews, it is obvious that the term "Jew" bore no mark of ethnic discrimination.

The liturgical texts of the Church carry on the same usage we find in the Gospel of John. They testify to a time when the Church knew herself to have come "of age" and could speak for Herself (John 9:21-23). The liturgical "Jew" is a term of historical fact, not an expression of ethnic prejudice.

©2008 Patrick Henry Reardon

**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

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php