

May 10, 2009

The Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

We are accustomed to thinking of the teaching of Jesus as unfiltered, so to speak. I mean by this, we tend to read it as directly addressed to us in our own time and in our own circumstances; it is eternally applicable.

However, to think of the teaching of Jesus as "eternal"—eternal plain and simple—runs the risk of separating it from the actual ministry of the Teacher, because His was a teaching conveyed *in the flesh*. An important inference drawn from the declaration that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" is, I believe, the thesis that the Lord's teachings were circumscribed by time and space---the limiting factors of His own culture and circumstances.

For this reason, Christians from the earliest times have been obliged to make creative adjustments to those teachings, often through applications to analogous circumstances. Sometimes those adaptations of what Jesus taught revealed great insight into other aspects of the Christian Mystery.

An easy example of such an adjustment is found in the case of the dominical command regarding sacrifices in the temple. Jesus directed His contemporaries, we recall, "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

After A.D. 70, however, there was no longer a temple in which the offering could be made. Indeed, during the forty years prior to the temple's destruction, the original context of this dominical injunction was quite alien to the actual circumstances of those thousands of Christians who lived nowhere near Jerusalem or would ever set eyes on the temple.

For this reason, the Lord's injunction about reconciliation and offerings was applied to a new context, as we see in the *Didache*, a Syrian document from probably the late first century. There we read: "But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they are reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned" (Ch. 14). Indeed, to this very day, Christians still understand the Holy Eucharist as the appropriate context in which to apply Jesus' teaching about fraternal reconciliation prior to the offering

of sacrifice. We adhere to this dominical injunction all the time, with never a conscious thought of the temple.

In taking this example, in which the temple is the original context of the Lord's command, we touch on another theme of His teaching: the coming destruction of the temple. The gospels provide evidence that Jesus spoke on this subject. In fact, the point was raised at His trial before the Sanhedrin, albeit from false witnesses (cf. Matthew 26:60-61). We read these prophecies nowadays with hardly a thought to the political context in which they were spoken.

However the Lord's prophecies about the destruction of the temple were understood prior to the year 70, the context for their understanding altered dramatically after the temple was actually destroyed in that year. We see this change in perspective in the gospels, where the Lord's predictions of the destruction of the temple (at least in Matthew and Mark) are set within His teaching about the Last Times and the end of the world.

During the first decade or so of the Church's history, nonetheless, what the Lord had to say about the coming destruction of the temple was largely understood in the political context of that time. For this reason, it was certainly a point of friction between Jesus' disciples and the other Jews. We see this friction in the case of Stephen, about whom his accusers said, "This man does not cease to say things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:13-14).

Stephen himself, far from denying the charge, gave it extra weight in the course of his examination, insisting that "the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands" (7:48). Rather early, that is to say, what Jesus had to say about the coming destruction of the temple prompted some Christians, such as Stephen, to think more deeply about the transitory nature of any shrine or sanctuary that men might build.

Those Christians, in their reflections on this point, went on to review the biblical teaching that even the tabernacle constructed by Moses had been modeled on a heavenly type revealed to the prophet on Mount Sinai. That sanctuary on high—in the very heavens to which Jesus had ascended—was the authentic model. Such reflections, derived from the Lord's prophecies about the temple's coming destruction, form much of the argument advanced in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Thus, various things the Lord said about the temple became seeds, as it were, planted in the creative thought of Christians. Memory became imagination.

Though the temple itself disappeared, what Jesus affirmed of it continued to grow and develop in the understanding of Christians.

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