

May 24, 2009

The Sunday of the Blind Man

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

To grasp the meaning of Jesus' unique self-identification, "the Son of Man," we should begin, I think, with those dominical sayings that most clearly evoke the vision of "a son of man" in Daniel 7. These sayings, which form significant blocks in the gospels, generally have to do with the Last Judgment and the end of history.

The clearest and most dramatic example comes in the scene of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin: "Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, 'Are You the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?' Jesus said, 'I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven'" (Mark 14:61-62). It is worth observing that this solemn word---and warning!---was Jesus' final declaration to the leaders of Judaism. He had nothing further to tell them.

The title, "the Son of Man," first refers, then, to Jesus' claim to be the final arbiter of history. Because this term was so prominent in apocalyptic expectations among the Jews at the time, none of Jesus' hearers failed to appreciate the significance of this declaration.

What was new in Jesus' claim before the Sanhedrin was its public and official setting, because He had already used the same apocalyptic language in discourses to His disciples. He had said, for instance, "Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (8:38). Or again, "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. Amen, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 10:23). Similar examples abound (cf. 13:41; 16:27-28; 19:28; 24:27,30,37,39,44; 25:31).

As we shall consider presently, this apocalyptic note does not exhaust the meaning of the term "the Son of Man" as Jesus used it. His allusions to Daniel's vision, however, centered on a lively point at which Jesus addressed the expectations of His contemporaries, are the easiest to grasp.

That apocalyptic dimension of Jesus' self-understanding defies every attempt to "de-historicize" Him---to abstract His teaching from the existential setting of His life and death. Although many writers, especially in recent times, have engaged in such attempts, they have invariably changed the Gospel into some theory of

ethical and religious philosophy---a theory quite separable from the person of Jesus Himself. Whatever else may be said of "the historical Jesus," He was certainly motivated by apocalyptic concerns.

Moreover, it is perhaps the case that a renewed attention to this apocalyptic dimension of the Gospel---"a special and extreme mode of presenting the drama of saving history" (Von Balthasar)---is particularly needful today, by way of response to the secular messianisms, utopian hopes, and revolutionary impulses of modern culture and politics.

I make this suggestion in spite of two risks:

First, those secular efforts may co-opt the Gospel itself, because many Christian activists are marvelously naive. Attention to the apocalyptic dimension of the Gospel may easily be confused with recent efforts by some Christians to clothe essentially secular programs with a veneer of theological respectability.

I have in mind, not only the more obvious examples like Liberation Theology, but also a currently popular confusion of material prosperity with moral improvement. All of us have heard, for instance, a common political hypothesis which says, "Since abortions are performed when poor women are deprived of genuine choices, we can stop (or lessen) abortions by working for a more equal and just distribution of wealth." (Substitute "bank robbery" for "abortion," and the argument works equally well.)

Confusions like these can be avoided by directing adequate attention to other aspects of "the Son of Man," which I will discuss presently, especially the theme of the Cross.

Second, apocalyptic imagery and language readily lend themselves to fanaticism and unbridled speculation. As we see in some contemporary examples of preaching and publication, this danger is real, but it is hardly insuperable. Understanding and discretion are required. The most apocalyptic book of the New Testament testifies that apocalyptic images require special discernment: *Hode ho nous ho echon sophian*---"This requires a mind that has wisdom" (Revelation 17:9).

Apocalyptic is a branch of dogmatics. Holy Scripture, in not isolating eschatology from other aspects of doctrine, provides the model. So does the Creed, which, after listing the other essential dogmas of our confession, goes on to proclaim, "He will come again in glory to judge."

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