

May 31, 2009

The Sunday after Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In addition to its apocalyptic sense, Jesus used the term "the Son of Man" also in the context of His sufferings and death. Whereas the first usage was clearly drawn from Daniel, the reference in the second case is more complex.

This complexity is suggested by the Lord's comment respecting His betrayer: "The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed" (Mark 14:21). Now, this is a striking assertion: Jesus refers to the Sacred Scriptures---"it is written"---but where in the Sacred Scriptures was it written that the Son of Man must be betrayed to suffering and death? There is nothing of this in Daniel.

The "it is written" here refers, rather, to the many Old Testament prophecies regarding the afflicted just man (in Psalms), the suffering servant (in Isaiah), the meek king (in Zechariah), and so on---in short, all those godly figures persecuted for the sake of righteousness, whom God will vindicate. Jesus perceived that all those prophecies pertained to Himself. Even as He knew Himself to be "the Son of Man" foreseen by Daniel, He became aware that those other biblical texts likewise pertained to Him.

I contend that the themes of "the Son of Man" and the Passion were brought together, not in the minds of the Gospel writers or the theological speculations of the Christian Church, but in the self-interpretation Jesus was obliged to undertake in the actual circumstances of His life and ministry.

The gospels were not crafted in a way that permits us to trace that development, but it is reasonable to surmise that Jesus' assessment of those prophecies was prompted largely from the animosity and threats of those who opposed Him. Even as He considered His vocation as the Son of Man, His enemies' hostility caused Jesus to foresee the Cross that lay ahead.

We may consider Mark's account of the healing of the paralytic to illustrate this connection. In Mark's very careful literary sequence, this incident is portrayed as the first occasion on which Jesus calls Himself "the Son of Man." He asserts: "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority [*exsousia*] on earth to forgive sins (2:10)."

There is a clear allusion here to Daniel's vision in the reference to the *exsousia* of the Son of Man: "Then to Him was given authority [*exsousia*] and glory and

a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His authority is an everlasting authority [*he exsousia avtou exsousia aionios*]" (Daniel 7:14).

Now it is significant to Mark's theological intent that Jesus' initial claim to the authority of the Son of Man provides the context in which His enemies accuse Him of blasphemy: ""Why does He speak blasphemies like this?" (Mark 2:7). In the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin---the final occasion when Jesus calls Himself the Son of Man (14:62)---blasphemy is the charge that leads to His death sentence: ""What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death" (14:63-64). Mark thus ties together these two scenes of fierce hostility against the claims of the Son of Man, one at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the other at the end.

However these themes---the Son of Man and the Passion---came together in the self-interpretation of Jesus, we find them united everywhere in the gospels. This pattern is common to Matthew (12:40; 17:12,22; 20:18,28; 26:2,24,45), Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:31,33,45; 14:41), Luke (9:22,44; 18:31; 22:48; 24:7), and John (3:14; 12:23-24).

Nor can these many instances be explained on the hypothesis of common sources. Mark is the obvious source for some of the sayings in Matthew, but not all of them. Matthew certainly relies on another and independent source (apparently not shared by Luke). As for John's two references to the Passion of the Son of Man, they are not connected to the Synoptics in any way.

In other words, the association of the Lord's Passion with His self-awareness as the Son of Man goes back much earlier than any intermediary sources discerned in the gospels. In addition---as we have already reflected---there was nothing of it in the New Testament epistles. In short, the association certainly rests on the earliest stratum of Christian memory and doctrine: the words of Jesus.

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