

March 7, 2010

Third Sunday of the Great Fast

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The narrative sequence of the Synoptic Gospels places the Lord's healing of a leper very near the beginning of His ministry at Capernaum (Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16; Matthew 8:1-4). In all three accounts, the leper approaches Jesus with the same abrupt request: "If you wanted to, you could cleanse me."

In Mark's version---presumably the earliest of the three---the Lord's immediate response is . . . well, somewhat unexpected. I believe the original reading of the passage is that found in the fifth century Codex Bezae: "Then Jesus, becoming angry, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I want to---Be cleansed!'"

In speaking of Jesus' anger in this scene, the Codex Bezae stands virtually alone among extant manuscripts of Mark. Nearly every other copy---including the oldest---says that Jesus was "moved with pity" for the leper. Why, then, do I prefer the one manuscript that describes Jesus as "becoming angry"?

In addressing this question, a first point to bear in mind is that this textual variation did not arise from confusion, inadvertence, or a scribal error. In neither Greek nor English do these two expressions---"moved with pity" and "becoming angry"--- resemble one another even faintly. Whoever altered the wording did it deliberately.

Why, then, do I trust a fifth century manuscript (Codex Bezae), which says, "becoming angry," over many other manuscripts-including two from the fourth century (Codices Alexandrinus and Vaticanus)-which say, "moved with pity"?

Let me state the reason as simply as I can: It is much easier to imagine any number of scribes changing "becoming angry" to "moved with pity" than to imagine a single scribe---of any period---changing "moved with pity" to "becoming angry." That is to say, I find it impossible to suppose that anyone describing this scene would ascribe anger to Jesus unless there was reason to believe that Jesus was angry. Anger is absolutely the last thing we would expect of Jesus when He cleansed the leper, so it is inconceivable that any Christian made it up.

On the other hand, it is not at all difficult to imagine that some scribe, copying from a manuscript that said, "moved with anger" and suspecting he had a corrupt text in front of him, decided to "correct" it to "moved with pity." "Moved with pity" enjoys the benefit of greater probability. It is what a reader of the gospels would expect.

In fact, we know that many Christian scribes, over the centuries before the printing press, took it upon themselves to "correct" earlier manuscripts when they thought them to be in error. The examples of this phenomenon are numerous.

It should not surprise us that Mark's reference to Jesus' anger in this scene might have shocked some Christian copyists. Indeed, Mark's ready ascription of anger to Jesus was apparently a bit much even for the evangelist Luke. Observe how Luke (6:8) suppresses Mark's reference to the anger of Jesus in the story of the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:5). Luke (18:15-17) removes yet another reference of Mark to the indignation of Jesus (Mark 10:14). Both Matthew and Luke, likewise, when they describe Jesus' cleansing of the leper, omit any mention of the Lord's emotions. It is hardly remarkable, then, that some early Christian scribes had trouble thinking of Jesus as angry on this occasion.

Deciding that "becoming angry" is the correct description of Jesus as He cleansed the leper, one is obliged to explain that anger, and I offer the following conjecture: On the other occasion when Mark describes Jesus as angry---the healing of the man with the withered hand---the reason is His perception of heartlessness. I suspect this is also the case in the cleansing of the leper.

Jesus is surely not angry at the leper. It is not unreasonable, however, to think He is angry at the social condition of this outcast, whose sense of personal worth is so reduced that he doubted, not that Jesus could cleanse him, but that Jesus would even want to. This shunned man's misgiving is indicated by the hypothetical subjunctive---"if you wanted to" (*ean theleis*), a grammatical form hinting at his deep personal apprehension.

It is significant that Jesus touches the poor untouchable here. By this extra gesture of intimate reassurance, He assumes the leper's uncleanness, as it were, his outcast state. Henceforth, Mark observes, "Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places."

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