

March 14, 2010

Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the Eucharistic lectionary of the Holy Orthodox Church, St. Mark provides the lion's share of Gospel readings each spring, during the Great Fast.

Within this lectionary schedule, moreover, the narrative structure of the second half of Mark gives a deliberate contextual shape to the readings during the second half of Lent. Consequently, to grasp the intent of the lectionary on those three Sundays, we should first comment on Mark's literary structure.

Following Simon Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah---the point at which the first half of his Gospel is completed (Mark 8:29)---Mark's narrative accent shifts abruptly to the theme of the Lord's coming Passion: "He *began* to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). This is the first of three direct prophecies of the Passion, the other two being found in Mark 9:31 and 10:33-34.

The *Way* of the Cross governs this section of Mark. In fact, students of this Gospel have long commented on Mark's dramatic introduction of the term *hodos*, or "way," in connection with these three prophecies of the Passion. This word, which appears several times in this section (8:27; 9:33-34; 10:17,32,46), indicates the theme. It culminates in the enlightenment of a blind man, who then "follows" Jesus on the "way" (*hodos*---10:52). In other words, the healed blind man represents the ideal disciple summoned by Jesus at the beginning of this section of Mark: "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (8:34).

Those familiar with the Orthodox lectionary will recognize this latter text from the Gospel reading assigned for the Third Sunday of Lent. It is followed, on the next two Sundays, by the second and third of the Markan prophecies of the Passion (9:31; 10:33-34). That is to say, Mark's narrative outline, with its theme of the Way of the Cross, provides the structural component for the Sunday Gospel readings for the second half of Lent. Those who fashioned the Orthodox lectionary recognized the weight-bearing pillars of Mark's construction.

The Markan theme of the "way" involves more than just the enhanced use of the word *hodos*, however. The second half of Mark includes an actual journey: Each prophecy of the Passion is delivered in a different location, following a sequence that draws ever closer to Jerusalem, where Jesus will die on the Cross. The first such prophecy is spoken in the extreme north at Caesarea

Philippi (Mark 8:27), the second further south at Capernaum (9:33), and the third yet further south, on the far side of the Jordan (10:1).

By its choice of readings from Mark, the Orthodox lectionary follows this same narrative sequence in its Lenten Gospel readings---the story moves ever southward. The journey continues, moreover, with Jesus' move to Bethany on Lazarus Saturday and then climaxes with His entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Here the Way of the Cross is completed.

Thus, during the second half of the Great Fast, believers are steadily tutored on the meaning of the Cross. On the third Sunday of Lent they learn that "whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (8:35). On the fourth Sunday, they are taught, "if anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). On the fifth Sunday, they are instructed, "whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant" (10:42).

Inasmuch as the season of Lent is set aside to prepare for the initiatory Sacraments of the Church, it is hardly surprising that the Gospel reading for the fifth Sunday---two weeks before Pascha---makes special reference to Baptism and the Eucharist. On this day, following the Markan sequence, Jesus inquires of believers, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (10:38)

This double question, with its sacramental references to the Cross, touches the theological depths to which Lent is dedicated. The message of the Cross includes a summons to sacramental identification with Christ in the mystery of His death. Thus, we know "we were buried with him through baptism into death." (Romans 6:3). And, "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

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