

**August 8, 2010**

Sunday After the Transfiguration

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

The earliest apostolic proclamation was set within a narrative pattern that spanned "all the time [*en panti chrono*] that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21-22). This limited chronological format, reflected in early sermons (10:37-41; 13:24-30), was also preserved in the gospels of Mark and John.

Matthew and Luke extended this traditional framework forward by adding accounts of Jesus' conception and birth. This new material, for which the evangelists were indebted to special sources, tended to confer a more "biographical" interest on these two gospels. Such is particularly the case in Luke, who makes chronological notes in this material (1:5,26,36,57,59; 2:2,21,22,42).

Luke goes even further in the direction of "biography," by including a unique account of a visit of Jesus to the Temple at age twelve (2:41-50). This narrative is not simply added on to the infancy story; Luke structurally integrates it into the larger story that follows. Indeed, were it not for the very solemn style in which the account of John the Baptist is introduced (3:1-2), one might imagine that Jesus' public ministry, for Luke, began at age twelve!

A detailed investigation of the story strengthens this impression: Jesus speaks His first recorded words in the Temple, "sitting in the midst of the teachers both listening to them and asking them questions" (2:46).

The most striking detail here is that Jesus is "sitting." Luke does not portray Him as a student, but as one of the teachers, fully engaged in the discussions common among the rabbis: He asks questions, but He also answers questions. According to Luke's account, Jesus' teaching commences in that setting. (Later, when we first find Him in a synagogue [4:20-21], Jesus is seated to address the assembly.)

Luke sets this picture of the young Jesus, engaged in rabbinical discourse at age twelve, in structural parallel to a cluster of encounters in the Temple during the final week of His public ministry. The rabbinical debates---begun at age twelve---are taken up again, near the end of Jesus' life.

In the later scenes, nonetheless, the tone of the discussions becomes ominous: "as He taught the people in the temple and preached the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes, together with the elders, confronted Him" (20:1). In the ensuing encounters, Jesus addresses the questions put to Him, once again, by the official teachers of Israel: "Tell us, by what authority are You doing these

things?" (20:2)---"Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (20:22)---  
"Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife does she become?" (20:33).

Rabbinical debate, however, is not one-sided; Jesus, in turn, poses to Israel's teachers some questions of His own: "The baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men?" (20:4)---"Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do to them?" (20:15)---"Whose image and inscription does it have?" (20:24)---"How can they say that the Christ is the Son of David?" (20:41).

In short, Jesus' public ministry, according to Luke's portrayal, is framed between two accounts of discourse with the official and rabbinical authorities in the Temple---the first at age twelve and the second during the final week of His life. This narrative pattern, in which Jesus' destiny is declared in both places, is unique to Luke.

Recognizing this structure, we may observe another correspondence within it: the divine sonship. At the end of His initial encounter with the rabbinical authorities in the Temple, Jesus declared God to be "My Father" (2:49). In His final encounters with them, in that same Temple setting, Jesus returns to the theme: He tells the story of the vine-growers, a parabolic survey of Israel's history, in the final stage of which the Father sent His Son (20:9-19). It is a parable in the process of enactment, even Jesus tells it: "they knew He had spoken this parable against them" (20:19).

And why has the Son been sent to the vineyard? Jesus had provided the answer twenty-one years before: "Did you not know that I must be about the things of My Father?" Even then, He darkly outlined the final week of His life, when He would purge the Temple (19:40-48) and denounce the conduct of those who taught in it (20:45-47).

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