

August 29, 2010

The Beheading of John the Baptist

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

No consideration of the Savior's humanity is adequate, I believe, that fails to consider a simple fact, mentioned often in the Gospels: He prayed. Indeed, if we reflect that prayer is the highest human activity, we should say that His prayer reveals more about Jesus as a human being than anything else He did.

Holy Scripture conveys the impression our Lord was fond of praying alone and out-of-doors. For instance, Mark writes of the earliest days of the Jesus' ministry: "Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed" (1:35). In the Greek text, that final verb---"prayed"---is expressed in the imperfect tense, which denotes continued and/or repeated action. Mark implies that Jesus spent a significant period of time in that prayer. It began in the dark and ended after sunrise. Jesus prayed through the transition from night into day.

We know He also prayed through the transition from light to darkness---day to night. Mark writes of this somewhat later; the scene comes immediately after the multiplication of the loaves, which happened late in the day (6:35). Mark describes the apostles getting into their boat to sail away, while Jesus remained behind on the shore. Mark writes, "And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray. Now when evening came, the boat was in the middle of the sea; and He was alone on the land" (6:46-47). Here, the prayer of Jesus is said to begin in the light and continue into the darkness. It is not broken off until very late---"the fourth watch" (6:48; cf. Matthew 14:23-25).

It is almost impossible, I believe, to consider Jesus' preference for nocturnal prayer without suspecting it was related to the vast expanse of the Palestinian sky at night. In that setting our Lord made His own the rapturous admiration of David, who, a thousand years before, prayed under that same spangled vault: *Ki 'er'eh shaméka / ma'asé 'etsb'otéka / yaréha wekokabím 'ashér konántah*---"For I see Your heavens, / the work of Your fingers, / the moon and the stars, which You have appointed" (Psalm 8:3).

This reference to the "appointment" of the celestial bodies refers to the fourth day of Creation, on which, we are told, "God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night-and the stars" (Genesis 1:16). This nocturnal prayer of Jesus is set, then, not simply in the beauty of nature, but in the narrative of Creation.

I don't mean simply the story in Genesis, for the original account of Creation is much older than Genesis; it was already inscribed in the stars. Consequently, when Jesus prayed under the heavens, He not only spoke; He also listened, because the moon and the stars---and also the sun---had a story to tell: "The

heavens recount the glory of God, / And the firmament declares the work of His hands. / Day unto day tells the story, / And night unto night imparts the knowledge" (Psalms 19 [18]:1-2).

The first Creation narrative is much older than the Bible; Genesis 1 simply tells in words what the Creation itself tells without words. Indeed, the biblical author himself learned the story of Creation by doing what Jesus did---listening closely to the subtle message of the stars: "There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. / Their voice goes out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world" (19 [18]:3-4).

Of all creatures on earth, only the human soul has the receptive capacity to hear the narrative declared in the heavens, and---hearing it---to commune in prayer with the Creator revealed there. The Gospels testify that Jesus had frequent recourse to that communion, sometimes spending entire nights in such prayer: "He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12).

We already observed that the Evangelist Mark used the imperfect tense (denoting continued/repeated action) to speak of Jesus' prayer. Luke, going further, intensified this impression by using an awkward periphrastic construction, difficult to render in decent English. Literally it reads, "He was remaining apart in the wilderness and praying" (5:16).

Inasmuch as we find Jesus doing this from the very beginning of His public ministry, we are surely justified in thinking this preference was already the habit of a lifetime. Indeed, we suspect it began in childhood; He was able to read the heavens before He knew how to read the scroll of Genesis. We may think of the young Jesus, most of all, when we recall another line from Psalm 8 : "Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants / You have perfected praise."

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