

September 19, 2010

Sunday After Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the story of Jesus lost in the Temple---at twelve years old---is chiefly significant for its Christological import, its narrative structure conveys the "action" through the mind of Mary. Indeed, Luke invites us to take this approach in his final comment: "His Mother kept all these things in her heart." Moreover, unless the reader approaches the story through the mind of Mary, he will miss much of its drama.

We observe, first, that the "lost-ness" in the story is objective: Jesus is not lost in the sense that He does not know where He is, but in the sense that His mother did not know where He is. The action---the search---consequently, comes from Mary's side.

For this reason, the narrator does not tell us what Jesus is doing during the three days, but what Mary and Joseph are doing: "When they had finished the days, as they returned, the boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know; but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among relatives and friends. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him" (Luke 2:43-45).

The action first moves north. The storyteller does not spend those three days in Jerusalem with Jesus. He leaves town, rather, and travels with Mary and Joseph. He speaks of their worried search, though he does not directly mention their anxiety---and, indeed, it is made explicit only by Mary herself, in the closing dialogue (2:48)---because it is implied in the details of the search.

Not finding the boy Jesus after a day's journey, Mary and Joseph come back south to Jerusalem, to continue their pursuit in the same place they last saw Him: "Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions."

The Lord's parents are bewildered: "So when they saw Him," writes Luke, "they were amazed." Every parent understands the story: This is the child they have raised for a dozen years. Unaccountably, He does not accompany them back home after the Passover, as they reasonably expect. They have searched for Him frantically, but now, when they find Him, He displays not the slightest remorse or concern for their anxiety.

The mother of Jesus finds this insouciance on the part of her twelve-year old a

bit more than she is disposed to accept without complaint: "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously" (2:48). Then, the boy, instead of apologizing and promising it will not happen again, turns the question back on His mother: "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about the things of My Father?" From any other twelve-year old, this kind of answer would be called "back talk" and treated as impertinent.

It is useful to reflect, at this point, that Jesus---when His parents discover Him in the Temple---has been engaged (for three days?) in discussion with the rabbis; he has been asking them questions and answering theirs. In other words, Jesus has been engaged in a pedagogical and rhetorical method where a favored device is the "counter-question"---the answering of a question by a further and more probing question. We find this style of debate frequently in rabbinic literature and in the gospels.

Jesus, recently exposed to this pedagogical and rhetorical method here in the Temple, spontaneously has recourse to it as he answers His mother. When she inquires, "*Why* have you done this?" He responds, "*Why* did you seek Me? Did you not know?"

No, in fact, Mary did not know, nor do she and Joseph find much reassurance in this brief dialogue with Jesus. Luke tells us, "But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them" (2:50). Then, the three of them return to Nazareth---in silence, it would seem.

Mary is portrayed as "anxious"---her own word---amazed, and confused. Considered from her perspective---as Luke clearly intends---the story is most noticeable as a test of Mary's faith.

The angel Gabriel spoke to her nearly thirteen years earlier, when she was perhaps half of her present age. Indeed, she may not have been much older than Jesus is at the time they find Him in the Temple.

From that day when the angel visited her, it seems, Mary has understood rather little of what transpired. Like Abraham her father, she follows God's will in faith but can hardly guess where it is all leading. She walks obediently, day by day.

Luke's story, which chronicles Jesus' growth in wisdom, is told here through the person who witnessed that growth, and was obliged, in a very personal way, to explore its meaning.

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