

**December 26, 2010**

The Sunday After Nativity

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

The narrative tradition of the early Church---preserved especially in her liturgical practice---tended to fix the Savior's sufferings and death in a determined sequence that became standard. This explains why all four Gospels are in substantial harmony regarding that sequence. The fixing of that tradition also explains why all the Evangelists begin the Passion story on "the night He was betrayed" (1 Corinthians 11:23).

In each of the gospels except John, moreover, that betrayal is preceded by an account of His lengthy and agonizing prayer in the Garden.

The scene of Jesus agonizing in the Garden, on the night before His death, is among the most disturbing presentations among the Gospel narratives. It seems so out of character with what the Gospel stories---up to this point---would lead someone to expect. To a person reading the gospels for the first time, the image of Jesus here stands in stark contrast to the way He has hitherto been portrayed throughout His adult life. Where, now, is the serenity and self-assurance that tells the leper, "I will do it; be cleansed" (Matthew 8:3)? What, now, has become of the confidence that announces to the centurion, "I will come and heal him" (8:7)?

Of all the Gospel stories that portray the frailty of Jesus' humanity, none are more striking than the four accounts of the prayer He made during the hours before He was arrested. Here, more than anywhere else in the New Testament, we are presented with the phenomenon of an inner conflict of mind and heart, as Jesus struggles with the trauma of His impending Passion and Death.

These four accounts (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; Hebrews 5:7-8) most clearly testify to Jesus' intense psychological experience of weakness, doubt, and, finally, resolution. Each of these narratives portrays a dramatic conflict between the powerful psychological disposition of Jesus and what He perceives to be the will of God. The two options are mutually incompatible. Luke calls it a "struggle," an *agonia*.

Whether Jesus' conflict is conveyed in terms of sorrow (Matthew and Mark) or fear (Luke and Hebrews), these New Testament sources agree that He did not *want* to suffer and die a painful and most ignominious death, and He prayed to be delivered from it. Here, above all, we are presented with the profound mystery of self-emptying that the Apostle Paul called "the weakness of God." Each account of the Agony likewise demonstrates how "the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:25).

This strength is conveyed through Jesus' experience of prayer. All four stories of the Agony testify that it was in prayer that He resolved the conflict in His soul. Indeed, each Evangelist goes into some detail to describe this prayer and the resolution to which it leads.

With respect to this resolution, we should contrast the turbulence and trauma of Jesus in the Garden, not only with earlier scenes in His life, but also with His serenity and composure during the rest of the night and the following day. In the course of His two trials---Jewish and Roman---Jesus maintains a demeanor both calm and self-possessed, even as He endures indignities and great suffering. His final statement to the Sanhedrin is both solemn and self-assured (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62). No less dignified and confident are His few pronouncements to Pilate (John 18:36-37; 19:11), and He honors the curiosity of Herod with not a single syllable (Luke 23:9). We recognize, in short, that Jesus' prayer in the Garden---His prayerful acquiescence in the Father's will---strengthens Him for the dreadful ordeal to come.

These stories have their common historical source in the testimony of those who directly witnessed the event. These were the men that beheld Jesus, "who, in the days of His flesh, . . . offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death" (Hebrews 5:7).

All the accounts go back to three men: Peter James, and John. Apparently, they alone-situated only "a little farther" off (Matthew 26:39), "about a stone's throw" (Luke 22:41)-were able to see Jesus' kneeling posture (Mark 14:35) and hear those "vehement cries."

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