

February 13, 2011

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

A question is just as likely to convey truth as to seek it. If asking questions is a good way of learning, it is an even better way of teaching. Good teachers ask questions. Consequently, Jesus chiefly employs the interrogatory form as a mode of teaching. Jesus asks questions, moreover, just about as much as he tells parables. For this reason, we need to consider Jesus more closely as the Teacher, the *Rabbi*.

The Semitic expression "Rabbi" appears to have been a title most readily applied to Jesus during his public ministry. This usage is best preserved in John's Gospel, where "Rabbi" (or "Rabbouni," *my Rabbi*) is a standard way for people to address Jesus (John 1:49; 3:26; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 20:16). The word essentially means "Teacher."

The first time John wrote "Rabbi," however, he made a point of translating it into Greek---*Didaskalos*---perhaps because not all his readers were familiar with the Semitic term. This was the early occasion when "two disciples heard [John the Baptist] speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?' They said to Him, "*Rabbi*" (which is to say, when translated, *Teacher*), 'where are You staying?'" (1:37-38).

The equivalence of *Rabbi* and *Didaskalos* was also indicated in the first words Nicodemus spoke to Jesus: "*Rabbi*, we know that you are a *Didaskalos* come from God" (John 3:2). John also provides the Greek translation of "Teacher," when Mary Magdalene calls Jesus "Rabbouni" (John 20:16). Often enough, as well, John simply sticks with the Greek *Didaskalos*, instead of the Semitic word (8:4; 11:28; 13:13-14).

Mark, who goes the furthest in maintaining original Semitic expressions in his story of Jesus, also preserves "Rabbi" or "Rabbouni" as a title by which the disciples addressed Jesus (cf. 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; and, alas, 14:45). More often, however, Mark simply provides the Greek word (5:35; 14:14), especially in the case of direct address (4:38; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1).

Luke, who apparently had Gentile Christians in mind, avoids the Semitic "Rabbi," as a reference to Jesus. He always uses the Greek *Didaskalos* (7:40; 8:49; 9:38; 10:25; 11:45; 12:13; 18:18; 19:39; 20:21, 28, 39; 21:7; 22:11).

More curious---and provocative of comment---is Matthew's selective avoidance of "Rabbi" in reference to Jesus, probably because of a reluctance to place Jesus within the same category as those Jewish leaders who opposed the Gospel (cf. Matthew 23:7). In Matthew's version of the Gospel, Jesus is called "Rabbi" only twice---both times by Judas Iscariot! (26:25, 49)

Indeed, it appears that for Matthew the title "Rabbi" was to be eschewed altogether (cf. 23:8). Hence, when he calls Jesus "Teacher," he generally sticks to the Greek *Didaskalos* (8:19; 9:11; 12:38; 17:24; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36; 26:18).

(With respect to the title "Rabbi," it is worth remarking that not all Christians have emulated Matthew's avoidance of the expression. In spite of the injunction to "call no man Rabbi," Christians in the Middle East, as late as the eighth century, felt no scruple in addressing their priest as "Rabbi" [cf. John of Damascus, *Letter on Confession* 9].)

Thus, in one form or another---and constantly by implication---the first disciples thought of Jesus chiefly as "Teacher." And, as Teacher, Questioner, because controlled and directed questioning is an effective form of pedagogy. Questions actively engage the students' mental processes. When lectured to, the person takes in what the teacher says, but when questioned, the same person is invited to formulate a thought, to engage the lesson in the active processes of his own mind.

On occasion Jesus' questions served the purpose of engaging the disciples in either a discussion or an activity, making them participants in an event. One recalls how he engaged Philip at the time of the multiplication of the loaves:

"Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?' But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do" (John 6:5-6).

What, then, was accomplished by this question to Philip, since Jesus already "knew what He would do"? His question here served the purpose of evoking the assistance of the apostles in what was about to take place.

Jesus did not ask that question for Philip's sake, I believe, but for Andrew's. They were a pair. He knew that wherever you saw Philip, Andrew must be nearby (cf. Mark 3:18; John 12:22). The question was apparently meant to be overheard by Andrew, who promptly replied, "There is a lad here who has five barley buns and a couple of dried fish" (6:9). Now, they could get started!

Thus, by putting to Philip a question to which he already knew the answer, Jesus transformed these apostles from mere spectators to active participants in the experience of the multiplication of the loaves. It is *they* who will seat the people for the meal (6:10). It is *they* who will distribute the bread and fish (6:11). In this scene, then, Jesus' question both commences the event and provides for its participatory structure.

Something similar was at play, it seems, when Jesus asked the blind man at Jericho, "What do you want Me to do for you?" Jesus knew the man was blind, so why did he ask the question? Well, it served as an invitation for the blind man (Bartimaeus, Mark tells us) to ask---to engage Jesus in a give-and-take. It elevated the blind man to something more than the recipient of a blessing. It engaged him as a person. The question was a summons, a bidding, an invitation to express and take possession of his faith in Jesus. And, in fact, this is exactly what happened:

"He said, 'Lord, that I may receive my sight.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has made you well'" (Luke 18:41-42)

It is no wonder that Mark finishes this story by remarking of the blind man, "And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road" (Mark 10:52).

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