

May 15, 2011

Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The attentive reader of the Four Gospels may notice that they all contain---not too far into the story---a special scene in which Jesus inaugurates his teaching ministry. Those first formal sermons---different in each of the gospels---are preceded by other accounts of Jesus' activity, particularly of his miracles. Each sermon introduces themes important to the individual evangelist. As the narrative sequence shifts from Jesus' other activity to this formal teaching, the scene is introduced with a certain degree of solemnity, depending on the style favored by the individual Evangelist.

In Mark's Gospel, for instance, after three chapters describing Jesus' other activities, the Evangelist slows the pace in order to introduce the first sermon in dramatic detail. Mark writes, "And again he began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to him, so that he climbed into a boat and sat on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. Then he taught them many things by parables" (Mark 4:1-2). Thus, the Parables of the Kingdom do not begin until the writer has determined the location, the crowd has been assembled, and Jesus has settled himself in the boat. Only then does Jesus begin to speak.

In Matthew, the first sermon is preached, not at the lakeside, but on a mountain. Nonetheless, the dramatic correspondence between the two is perfect. After four chapters describing Jesus' other activities, Matthew suddenly adjusts the pace of the narrative to establish the *mis-en-scène* for the Sermon on the Mount: "Great multitudes followed him-from Galilee, and Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. And seeing the multitudes, he went up on a mountain, and when he was seated his disciples came to Him. Then he opened his mouth and taught them" (Matthew 4:25-5:2).

Although these are two very different sermons, each serves an identical function in its respective gospel. As the Parables of the Kingdom are programmatic for Mark, so is the Sermon on the Mount for Matthew. The similarity of detail is striking: In each setting the crowd gathers around Jesus, who sits down---the posture of a rabbi---to teach them. Each evangelist takes his time and deliberately adds details to solemnize the event.

In John's Gospel the inaugural discourse follows two chapters describing Jesus' other activities, including the first of his miracles (John 2:1-11). Here the teaching scene is developed differently from Mark and Matthew: The setting is private, the crowds being replaced by a single listener. The episode takes place at night. Jesus' ministry as a teacher is established, not by the narrator, but by Nicodemus, the only other person in the story: "Rabbi, we know that you are a

teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Then there follows the "God So Loved the World" discourse, which serves in John's Gospel the same sort of thematic role as the two sermons in Mark and Matthew.

In the Gospel of Luke, finally, the setting of the corresponding sermon, placed after more than three chapters of Jesus other activities, is even more detailed and elaborate than in the other gospels.

The Evangelist begins by informing us that Jesus had already been teaching: "Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all" (Luke 4: 14-15). Luke does not relate the substance of that earlier teaching, however, so that he may portray the sermon at Nazareth as a true inauguration. This he accomplishes in stunning solemnity:

First, Jesus "went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, according to his custom, and stood up to read, and he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah."

Next, "when he had unrolled the scroll, he found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / Because He has anointed me / To preach the gospel to the poor; / He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, / To proclaim liberty to the captives / And recovery of sight to the blind, / To set at liberty those who are oppressed; / To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Finally, "he rolled up the scroll, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:16-21).

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