

August 28, 2011

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Almost immediately after their accounts of the Lord's Transfiguration, the Synoptic Evangelists tell the story of the desperate father who brings his ailing son to Jesus, in hope of a cure for the lad. The story is complex, in both context and content, but three features are particularly striking.

The first is the attention given to Jesus' disciples, presumably those nine who had not been present at the Transfiguration. The boy's father mentions that those disciples were unable to bring the child any help (Mark 9:18). Although they had been sent out explicitly to heal sickness and expel demons (3:15), in the present case they were powerless to accomplish either. The reader is prompted to wonder why. What has transpired, since then, to explain this powerlessness?

Indeed, the disciples themselves were inquisitive on the point: "Why could we not cast it out?" (9:28)

In Mark's version of the story, the Lord's answer includes something about prayer and fasting (9:29), which is doubtless why Holy Church reads this version during Lent. It is during Lent that Christians pray and fast for the catechumens, over whom exorcisms are invoked, during that season, in preparation for Baptism at Pascha.

In any case, the Lord's response about prayer and fasting suggests that the disciples imagined that the expulsion of demons was a thing that could be accomplished without those disciplines. Indeed, the context of the story indicates that these men have become a bit self-satisfied and over-confident. Having lost their grip on the essentials, they have developed into religious big shots. They have been having discussions about who among them is the greatest (9:33-34). Having grown rather full of themselves, they have neglected prayer and fasting, and now they are unable to expel demons.

Worse still, just twenty verses after their recorded failure, they are going to come across someone else who is able to drive out demons, and they will try to put a stop to it! (9:38) They will thus compound their own failure with jealousy over someone else's success.

Second, there is the inquiry of Jesus about the little boy's medical history: "How long has he been like this?" (9:21) This is not a medical inquiry, however, but a pastoral question. What Jesus is really saying is, "Talk to me about the child. What's the story"

This is significant: Jesus wants to hear the account. It is important to him to hear the story, so he invites the boy's father to tell the story. Each person who comes to Jesus has a personal narrative, and Jesus, who already knows the story, still wants to listen to it. To Jesus it is important that each person tells him his own story.

Divine revelation is conveyed, not only in what God says to man, but also in what man says to God. God's story does not exclude men's stories. It contains them, rather. What Jeremiah says to God is part of what God reveals to us through Jeremiah. The questions Habakkuk addresses to God are just as revelatory as the answers God gives to Habakkuk. So, too, with Job. The prayers of the Psalmist contain the narrative that God wants to hear from the human soul. Revelation is a two-way street.

Third, something should be said about the faith of the father, who brings his ailing child to be helped. On a first reading of the account, to be sure, it might be thought that the father's faith was deficient. After all, his request is answered by Jesus' comment about an "unbelieving generation" (9:19).

Did the man himself really have faith? He himself apparently wondered about the point, because he prayed, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" He is conscious that his soul is buffeted by doubt, a doubt at war with his weak and meager faith. He does what he can; he prays with what faith he can muster.

In the end, this man's struggling faith is more pleasing to God than the spiritual laziness and self-satisfaction of the Lord's disciples. This man at least does not think of himself as a religious big shot. He is not busy pushing his own religious agenda; he is struggling just to hold on in a desperate situation. He entertains no fancy about being better than someone else.

And his prayer---a prayer for help against his own unbelief---is pleasing to the Lord, and his afflicted son is made well. Unlike the disciples in this scene, this man is humble, and the humble are pleasing to the pastoral heart of Christ.

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