

January 27, 2013

Third Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Vineyard

By shared imagery and themes, Luke's treatment of the Transfiguration is linked to the story of the Vine Growers (Luke 20:9-19).

As in the other Synoptic Gospels, the final week of Jesus' life provides Luke's setting of the Parable of the Vine Growers. In all these cases, indeed, the parable begins a series of stories of Jesus confronting those who are plotting to murder him. Moreover, the three versions of this parable, simply compared, do not greatly differ.

What distinguish them in Luke's version are two features that tie the parable back to earlier scenes in his narrative, especially his account of the Transfiguration; these two features are first, the identification of Jesus as "beloved Son" and, second, the theme of prophetic fulfillment.

For Luke the Parable of the Vine Growers, in which God's sending of His Son is the defining event of history, serves as an extension of what Jesus declared when he read Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). In the story of the Vine Growers, we discern how Jesus addressed, in his own heart, the great dimensions of his destiny. That is to say, the interest in this parable, as in the earlier scene in the synagogue, is autobiographical. Jesus is telling a story about himself.

The parable begins with God's historical choice of Israel: "Then he began to tell the people this parable: 'A certain man planted a vineyard, leased it to vinedressers, and went into a far country for a long time.'" Once again, as in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus appeals to a text from Isaiah: "A song of my beloved regarding his vineyard: My beloved has a vineyard" (Isaiah 5:1).

In Jesus' parable, as in Isaiah, the vineyard is an image of God's Chosen People, Israel: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, / And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant" (Isaiah 5:7).

The parable tells the story of Israel as a series of divine expectations Israel not only fails to meet but also treats with mounting contempt: "Now at vintage-time [the vineyard owner] sent a servant to the vine growers, that they might give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the vine growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent another servant; and they beat him also, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent a third; and they wounded him also and cast him out."

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke limits the number of these pre-Christian delegations to exactly three. It is possible that the Evangelist has in mind here the three-fold division of the biblical canon: Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

The "beloved Son" will not be sent to the vineyard until these three witnesses have failed to lead Israel to the works befitting repentance. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of the three was to prepare for the coming of that beloved Son, in whom the Scriptures would be fulfilled: "all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me" (Luke 24:44).

Thus, the story reaches a culminating point in the mission of the Son: "Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send My beloved Son. They will likely (isos) respect him.'" "My beloved" (agapetos mou) is, of course, the name by which the Father referred to the Son in the scenes of his Baptism and Transfiguration.

The same expression---agapetos mou---is used, also, in the Septuagint (Greek) version of Isaiah's poem-"My beloved has a vineyard." Here agapetos mou translates Isaiah's Hebrew expression dōdi, "my beloved." Jesus' parable, then, identifies the son as the "my beloved" in Isaiah's poem. It is to him that the vineyard truly belongs, because he is the heir. He is the son with regard to God, and the heir with regard to Israel's history.

Jesus proceeds to identify those vine growers who are plotting his own murder: "But when the vinedressers saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.'"

This story provides Jesus' own interpretation of both his mission and the death he is about to suffer: He is the "heir" of the ancient ministry of Israel's prophets and

wise men---those scriptural figures represented, in the Transfiguration scene, by Moses and Elijah. Recognizing this, the unfaithful vine-growers "cast him out of the vineyard and killed him."

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