

March 24, 2013

First Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Three Prophecies

In the Gospel of St. Mark there is a record of Jesus' three prophecies of the coming drama of Redemption. These are evenly placed in chapter 8-10 of Mark and provide structure for his development of the theme of the Cross. They begin abruptly, immediately after Peter's confession of faith.

Indeed, Mark introduces the first prophecy as a new beginning, a shift of theme in the progress of his story: "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly" (Mark 8:31-32).

Each of Jesus' prophecies of the Passion and Resurrection meets with resistance on the part of his disciples. The first prophecy is answered by Peter, who is apparently is taking himself a bit too seriously after his recent confession of faith: "Then Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned around and looked at His disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (8:32-33).

Starting with the case of Peter, Jesus uses this apostolic resistance to develop the theme of the Cross more in depth. Here, in the first case, he goes to exhort the disciples to imitate him with respect to the Cross:

"When he had called together the people, with his disciples as well, he said to them, 'Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.'" (Mark 8:34-35).

In this first prophecy Jesus foretells what is about to happen, but he does not yet expound on its redemptive significance. This will gradually change as new details are introduced, not only in the next two prophecies but also in the exhortatory material that follows them.

The second prophecy commences very much like the first: "He taught his disciples and said to them, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And after he is killed, he will rise the third day" (9:31).

In this case, the resistance of the disciples is implied, at first, by Mark's comment that "they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him" (Mark 9:32). There is more to the story, however, and Mark fills us in as to what the disciples had on their minds at the time:

"And when he was in the house he inquired of them, 'What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?' But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who was greatest. So he sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'If anyone desires to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant (diakonos) of all'" (9:34-35).

Here, in the exhortation that follows the second prophecy, Jesus introduces the image of the "servant." At this point the reference is general: Every disciple is to be a "servant of all." Jesus does not indicate that the image of the servant has any meaning except as a moral and spiritual metaphor. Its further significance will not become clear and explicit until the third prophecy.

The third prophecy of the Passion contains graphic details not found in the earlier two; all of these additions correspond to Mark's narrative of Good Friday: "Now they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were astounded. And as they followed they were afraid. Then he took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to him:

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn him to death and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and scourge him, and spit on him, and kill him. And the third day he will rise again" (Mark 10:32-34).

It is at this point that Mark, continuing the theme of apostolic resistance to the Word of the Cross, tells the story of James and John, who audaciously request that Jesus give them preeminent places in the Kingdom: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. . . . Grant us that we may sit, one on your right hand and the other on your left in your glory" (10:35-37).

Mark and his readers recognize the irony: When Jesus does enter into his kingdom, there are thieves to his right hand and his left (15:27). Then, in response to this request of Zebedee's sons, Jesus discloses the salvific meaning of what he is about to endure. Two points of that teaching reveal his interpretation of what is soon to happen.

First, Jesus speaks of the coming Passion in sacramental imagery that Mark's readers will recognize in the two rites by which Christians are identified, Baptism and the Eucharist. Jesus tells the two brothers:

You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? . . . You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized . . . (Mark 10:38-39).

Both images, baptism and the cup, are found elsewhere in the New Testament as symbolic of the Lord's passion. Relative to baptism there is Luke 12:50: "But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am straightened until it be accomplished."¹

Relative to the cup, the Synoptic descriptions of the Lord's agony in the garden and his arrest show it to refer to his sufferings, and, once again, interpreters over the course of Christian history have cited those other texts when interpreting the account of Zebedee's sons. ² The Savior, declared St. John Chrysostom, called "his crucifixion a cup and his death a baptism."³

Mark's account of Jesus' inquiries about baptism and the cup was poignant and timely for the Christians at Rome, who were thereby instructed about an important dimension of their own participation in the sacraments; there was a

¹ Over the centuries readers have appealed to this Lukan passage to interpret the reference to baptism in the story of James and John; cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.21.2; St. Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 35; St. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Joannem* 25.2; Haymo of Halberstadt, *Homiliae de Tempore* 38; Rupert of Deutz, *De Divinis Officiis* 6.15; *In Joannis Evangelium* 13.19.

² St. Clement of Alexandria, *Paidagogos* 1.6; St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 16.2; *Tractatus in Joannem* 28.5; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 126.4 ; Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Epistola XIV ad Ferrandum* 41; Paschasius Radbertus, *Epistola ad Fredugardum*; Ambrose Autpert, *In Apocalypsin* 5).

³ St. John Chrysostom, *De Petitione Filiorum Zebedaei* 5

cost involved. Even to be a Christian at Rome was a risky business, for Christians were regarded as enemies of the state, and actual martyrdom was a possibility for anyone in the Church. We may wonder what James and John—at the time Jesus spoke these words—understood of them, but Mark’s immediate readers, as well as other Christians afterwards, understood the message clearly; it meant martyrdom.⁴

Second, Jesus proceeds to call James and John, along with all his disciples, to a life of service, a theme introduced in connection with the previous prophecy:

You know that they who are considered rulers over the Gentiles hold dominance over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Still, it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant (diakonos). And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave (doulos) of all (10:42-44).

Understood in the immediate context of the baptism and cup of which Jesus must partake, readers may suspect that this shift from “servant” to “slave” introduces a new perspective. They are correct; Jesus promptly identifies himself as that slave: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (10:45).

⁴ Cf. P. H. Reardon, “The Cross, Sacraments, and Martyrdom: An Investigation of Mark 10:35–45,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 36/1&2 (1992); “Sacraments, Martyrdom & the Sons of Zebedee: Two Gospel Texts in the Tradition,” *Touchstone* 11/5 (1998).

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