

April 13, 2014
Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

A consideration of the Atonement would be incomplete without some treatment of the Parable of the Vine Growers in Mark 12:1-12. However, having treated this parable at some length in *The Jesus We Missed*, I propose here to limit our reflections to Jesus' introduction, in the subsequent development of the story, of "the stone which the builders rejected." According to Mark, he says to his enemies, "Have you not even read this Scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected / Has become the chief cornerstone. / This is the Lord's doing, / And it is marvelous in our eyes?'"

The parable's transition from a "son" to a "stone"—a bit of a stretch, not only in English, but also in the inspired Greek text—makes perfect sense when traced to the Hebrew wording of the psalm Jesus quotes. In Hebrew a "son is a ben, and a stone is an 'eben. In fact, this play on words appears repeatedly in the Targumic literature related to Psalm 117 (Hebrew 118).

Several observations are in order with respect to this sudden quotation from the Book of Psalms:

First, Jesus may have been somewhat preoccupied with this psalm during the last week of his life. According to Mark's chronological sequence, the enthusiastic crowd cited this psalm with respect to Jesus on Sunday (Mark 11:9), and, in the context of the parable, Jesus quotes it again on Tuesday. This very early remembrance of Psalm 117 surely accounts for its pride of place in the traditional format of Orthodox Matins.

Second, an ancient Jewish interpretation of this psalm identifies young David as the son, or stone, originally ejected "rejected" among the sons of Jesse. He was, after all, the youngest boy, so that his father did not even invite him to the "rehearsal" with the prophet Samuel, as described in 1 Samuel 16. At some point in the history of this psalm, it was understood as a celebration of David's improbable rise to the monarchy.

The association of David with this psalm explains the acclaim of the crowd on Palm Sunday: “Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is our father David’s kingdom that comes in the name of the Lord!” Jesus’ association with David appears one more time in his Holy Week confrontations with his enemies. He finishes these confrontations by declaring, “How is it that the scribes say that the Messiah is the Son of David? . . . David himself calls him ‘Lord’; how can he be his Son?” (Mark 12:35, 37).

Third, the vocabulary in the builders’ “rejection” of the chosen stone is consistent with Mark’s narrative of the Passion. The relevant verb is *apodokimazo*. Thus, when the psalm speaks of the “stone the builders rejected (*apedokimasan*),” the word picks up an idea Mark introduced in his third prophecy of the Passion, where we learned, “the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected (*apodokimasthenai*) by the elders and chief priests and scribes” (Mark 8:31).

It is significant that that prophecy immediately followed Peter’s confession of Jesus as “the Messiah” (8:29). That confession, repeated by Bartimaeus (10:47-48) and then by the crowd at Jerusalem (11:10), prepared for the crisis during which Jesus told the parable of the Vine Growers. Their plotted murder of the Beloved Son will fulfill Jesus’ three prophecies.

Fourth, whereas in the parable in Isaiah 5, the vineyard is destroyed, this is not the case in Jesus’ parable. Here the vine growers, not the vineyard, are destroyed. As for the vineyard itself, it is, so to speak, put under new management: “Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine growers, and give the vineyard to others” (Mark 12:9). Israel’s current leaders—such as the men who comprise the Sanhedrin—lose their place of authority over the People of God.

Immediately, therefore, Jesus speaks of a new structural basis for the House of God: “The stone the builders rejected / Has become the chief cornerstone” (12:10). This is the Christian Church, the true and legitimate historical continuation of the People of God, a structure based on Christ himself. The “others,” therefore, to whom the care of the Vineyard is entrusted, are the Apostles and those succeeding them in

the ministry, the very men chosen to “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28).

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