August 5, 2007
The Feast of the Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Except for the Lord's Prayer itself, it is arguable that the Good Shepherd Psalm is better known among more Christians than any other memorized prayer. I suspect that this may always have been the case. At least this much is clear: the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd has been among the most popular since the earliest days of Christian history.

The strong support of this ancient popularity, of course, were the records of Jesus' explicit references to Himself as the Good Shepherd, and in this respect the Gospel of John holds the primary place. At the very end of that Gospel, Jesus referred to Christians as "My lambs" and "My sheep" (John 21:15-17), but the longer development of that idea was found in chapter 10. In that chapter several aspects of the image were treated: the sensitivity of the sheep to the Shepherd's voice (vv. 3-5, 8, 14, 16, 27), the utter uniqueness of the Shepherd in contrast to the hireling or the robber (vv. 1, 2, 8-10, 12, 13), the Shepherd's giving of His life for His sheep (vv. 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18), the gathering of the lost sheep into a single flock (v. 16) and their total security (vv. 28, 29). In all of these Johannine examples the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is based on explicit statements of the Lord Himself.

This is not true everywhere in the New Testament, however. In at least two cases, the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is not based on what Jesus said, but on the Gospel writer's mention of how Jesus *felt*. In these two instances the evangelists were endeavoring to get *inside* Jesus, as it were, and lay hold on His emotion. In both cases the emotion described was compassion. I propose to consider one of these passages now and the second one later.

The first text is found in Matthew, where we read, " But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, 'the harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest'" (9:3-38).

There is a curious feature immediately evident here; namely, the evangelist uses a metaphor completely different from the metaphor used in Jesus' own words. Whereas Jesus speaks of laborers and a harvest, the evangelist writes of a flock. Strictly speaking, of course, there is no "mixing of metaphors" in the text, because each metaphor comes from a different source. They are juxtaposed, but they are not confused. The pastoral metaphor in this text is inserted by the evangelist to provide a kind of "psychological explanation" for what Jesus said. This is the sole intent of the shepherd image in this passage.

Since the pastoral reference in this passage does not come from Jesus' words, from where does Matthew get it? A simple glance at a concordance at this point sends us to the books of Numbers (27:17), 1 Kings (22:17), Ezekiel (34:5), Zechariah (10:2), and Judith (11:15), all of which speak of the God's concern that the Israelites not be like "sheep without a shepherd." Matthew's appeal to this image, therefore, signifies that the compassion of Jesus, His sympathy for the people, fulfills the prophetic content of these biblical texts.

The evangelist's reference here is unusual, in this sense: Matthew is interpreting Holy Scripture by describing Jesus' emotion. While it is no rare thing for a New Testament writer to see the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in something Jesus did and said, what we find in the present text is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in a how Jesus *felt*. His compassion for the very people in front of Him is identified with God's mercy manifest throughout Israel's history. Matthew explains Jesus′ feeling by appealing to a biblical theme: "He was moved with compassion for them, *because* they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd."

In this text of Matthew, then, the compassionate feeling of Jesus contains a "because," inasmuch as that feeling is placed in a context of biblical history. Specifically, it identifies Jesus' compassion with that demonstrated to the Israelites during the desert wandering (Numbers), during the age of the monarchy (1 Kings), during the Babylonian Captivity (Ezekiel), and during the post-exilic period (Zechariah). The human compassion of Jesus is seen to be of whole cloth with the divine mercy that unifies biblical historiography as the continuous narrative of God's flock. In the eyes of Matthew, Jesus represents the defining and most recent historical intrusion of that mercy.

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