

June 24, 2007

St. John the Baptist

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the several ways of confessing what we believe about Jesus, not least important, I think, is our posture when we pray to Him. To be sure, we can pray to our Lord in any of several postures, and it may be the case that each of them expresses some distinct aspect of our faith.

Standing before Christ, for instance, intimates a readiness to do His will. That, we recall, was the posture of John the Baptist (John 3:29). Again, sitting in the presence of Christ suggests a humble submission of ourselves to His tutelage. Such was the case with Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:39). Again, prayer on bended knee is a very special posture of love and supplication to Christ. Peter (Acts 9:40) and Paul (20:36) preferred to pray that way, and we know that Stephan died on his knees in the presence of Christ (7:60).

Even lying down on our beds, moreover, may express the confident faith that our Lord makes us dwell in peace and safety (Psalms 4:8). Indeed, that was the position in which the waking daughter of Jairus first encountered Him (Mark 5:41).

Among the bodily postures expressive of our faith in Christ, however, the most solemn is that of prostration, or adoration (*proskynesis*). This is especially obvious in the Gospel of Matthew, which rather habitually pictures various people encountering Jesus in that posture. Indeed, in Matthew prostration is a supreme expression of the Christological faith.

We may note, for starts, that Matthew both begins and ends his account of Jesus' life by describing believers as prostrate before Him in faith. Thus, near the beginning of Matthew, the Magi from the East came "to adore Him"-- *proskynevsai avto* (2:2). Nor were these distant Gentiles frustrated in their quest. "And when they had come into the house," wrote Matthew, "they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and adored Him"--*prosekynesan avto* (2:11).

At the other end of that same gospel, just before the Eleven are sent out to make disciples of the Gentiles, Matthew says of them, "When they saw Him, they adored"-- *prosekynesan* (28:17). In Matthew's story the whole life of Jesus is framed in adoration.

For Matthew this prostration before the Lord Jesus is a ritual confession of His divinity. This interpretation is very clear if we compare several scenes in Matthew with their parallels in Mark. Thus, when the leper met Jesus in Matthew, he

"adored Him" (*prosekynei avto*-8:2), a detail not found in Mark (1:30). In Mark's account of Jairus meeting Jesus, he says that "when he saw Him, he fell at His feet" (5:22), whereas Matthew says that he "came and adored Him" (*prosekynei avto*--9:18).

It is the same for the disciples after the stilling of the storm. Mark writes, "they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled" (6:51). In Matthew, however, we read, "then those who were in the boat came and adored Him (*prosekynesan avto*), saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God'"(14:33).

We distinguish the same feature in two accounts of women approaching Jesus. According to Matthew, the wife of Zebedee (who does not appear in Mark's Gospel) "came to Him with her sons, adoring (*proskynousa*) and asking something from Him" (20:20). In the case of the Canaanite woman, Mark says, "she came and fell at His feet" (7:25), whereas in Matthew we read, "she came and adored Him" (*prosekynei avto*--15:25).

In Matthew this verb *proskyneo* describes a properly Christian act of adoration. To see that this is so, it is instructive to examine an instance where Mark uses the verb but Matthew does not. It is the case of the Gadarene demoniac, of whom Mark says, "When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and adored Him" (5:6). Matthew (8:28) omits the word in this case. Reserving this verb for specifically Christian acts of worship, Matthew declines to use it of a man possessed by demons.

Matthew's use of this verb, in short, illustrates the Christology of the (apparently Syrian) church for which he writes. Matthew describes all these various characters in his gospel as falling down in adoration before Jesus, because he recognized in them the content and structure of the Church's faith in the full divinity of God's Son.

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