

Parable Sermon

Bill Huntley, October 16, 2005

Before we look at the Biblical texts assigned for us today in the lectionary of MT 22:15-22 which has a clear demarcation from the PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST that was read here last week, I would like to say something about the place meant in the Gospel itself. IN the final version the editor in his/her arrangement of Matthew's Gospel puts both of them in the almost last words of Jesus in the final days in Jerusalem. Does that mean these are the most important things he said? I think not. But the instructions for the tribute to Caesar come just before questions about the resurrection, and just after this allegorical wedding feast. Does that mean we go to a wedding, pay our taxes, even in the last days, and then ponder our resurrection. To mean that seems a stretch, so these may be the left over note cards that Matthew had for his research that did not seem to fit anywhere else, or that in Jerusalem at the end of his days on earth Jesus got asked a lot of questions from people and he answered them one by one, in a manner appropriate to the question. In fact, the order of the tribute to Caesar for today and the resurrection questions, were not Matthew's order, but they came from Mark who wrote a decade or two before and left his work for others to add something to. So ask him in the hereafter.

So, someone asked last week, "What about that guy thrown out of the wedding for having on the wrong clothes?" May

I comment on this, dear friends. The wedding feast parable came from a different source, Mark did not have it or did not like it. It comes from something we call “Q” That is the sources for the gospels that both Matthew and Luke used. This story is also known to the author of the gospel of Thomas, found in our lifetime in Egypt in Coptic language of the Christians there today, who still speak Coptic, although there are fewer and fewer of them.

IN any case Mathew does a double allegory here with what Jesus had already suggested was something more than a normal, if beautiful wedding, like Liz’s last month. Here the people did not show up, the ones who were invited, that is. Sherman Johnston and others in the comments he offers (“Matthew” IB. Vol 7, p. 516) connect the servants as the Jews who did not accept Jesus invitation, so the king (must be the Roman Emperor) sending his army in the Jewish War in 70 AD (CE). For that war had ended and Matthew would be writing after 70 Ad and would like to show how Jesus prediction had already come true. Matthew loved to find prophecies and predictions that were already or being realized. So others are now invited to the feast. The author of the Gospel would know that Paul and others were already at work in Asia Minor, Greece and even Rome, so those folk were invited.

But then we have one guy showing up without the right clothes. Maybe it was like a guy who wears shorts and not long trousers, or some students from California going to

teach English in Japan without a shirt at tie....No way. I had to take them to the Salvation Army store for their first such ornaments. So essential to the Japanese is clothing. And for those of us who visited the Mormon Tabernacle up on the hill toward Yucaipa, we could see the way the Mormons took this and other passages so literally that they have white gowns for everyone who qualified to be so decked out. Clearly, I was not offered such a robe and have to be stretched to wear one on special days. There is also “fine linen for the saints” in the Book of Revelation.... (19:8), if you want to be properly dressed for the rapture, ..

“Bind him hand and foot and take him away to utter darkness.” We read. In another 2nd century book of this era, Enoch 10:4, The Lord tells the good angel Raphael to bind up the bad angered Azazel”hand and foot and cast him into the darkness: so it was somewhat of a common suggestion of that era. Even Matthew, just after he puts in the Sermon on the Mount (5-7) in MT 8:12 records Jesus sending another chap to Gehenna. Who these improperly prepared people are is less clear than some folk, who might even declare me among the ones headed for Gehenna, if not for my clothes, but for my interpretations. But this not a heresy trial today. And let’s go back to the assigned scripture.

In the instructions to the taxpayers of ancient Jerusalem, Jesus was asked a legitimate question, about paying tax. I share the concern. I hate to see my hard earned money

being taken and used for a war I would not have served in had I been reduced in age by 50 years. So if I would not serve in a war I consider stupid, why should I pay tax to a government I consider led by misguided fools who want tax breaks for people who earn more money than I do . By the way scholars call this a “pronouncement story” as opposed to a Parable as we have just seen or an allegory. So note how quickly Jesus or the editor of Matthew can shift “genre.” Some unnamed person pops up out of Jerusalem streets and says, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

As a child I remember being shocked with the clarity of the answer, “Jesus asks for a coin (after calling the questioner “hypocrite”, perhaps because he knows the guy has already paid his tax...or that he was being pursued by the Roman IRS, and had not ever paid tax, like that jerk on Survivor, Richard something, who won a million dollars on TV and did not pay his tax)

So he asks for a coin and has someone observe the image of the Roman ruler on the coin, as we have coins with our “rulers”, the new Jefferson Nickel, which is quite nice, I think so if Jefferson is on the coin, give Jefferson back his due.

Commentators note that in Judea, the province of Rome ruled directly by Rome with Pontius Pilate as representative called a procurator the coins indeed had Roman rulers on him. The Galilee was actually in under Herod’s son Antipas was coining his own money. Antipas had just made

an extra levy on his subjects, so the question might have been if that levy was acceptable. Did Jesus speak just about that levy, all Roman taxes, and all taxes for all time? Are they all to be paid without resistance?

Jews of Jesus time were very much challenged by such questions, if they believed in a world in which God was the king, should taxes be paid to support an illegal government.

It was not so easy an answer I later came to think. Although I should say, I have tried to pay my taxes, with care in recent decades, after two audits in my early years. The errors were sometimes mine, and my arithmetic but sometimes those tax guys got some bonus, for finding more money from folk like me. But my resistance is not quite like those Jews who encounter Jesus.

Jesus like OT prophets like Nathan, even if paid by David; Amos, who earned his money as a farmer; and Isaiah, cousin of the king of his day who saw weakness and crookedness in his own family...these guys believed “in the strictest possible view “ of God’s as king. “God was directly concerned with everything in human life, and whatever opposed him was sinful and must some day be brought to naught: (Johnson 518)

Does Jesus answer suggest he was not to be involved taxes? Or did he just realize that in Jerusalem where some hoped he would be a revolutionary leader not following any of the rules of the Romans and thereby make him a leader of those

who wanted to overthrow Rome.

When Jesus is tried later that week, it was not for tax evasion. It was for a far more important claim, wasn't it?

I think that is the reason that this story is recorded just before one about the resurrection, the Sitz im Leben, the setting in life of the story and the setting in the gospel tradition itself by Mark was intentional. That is to point beyond taxes to something greater, but this is Sylvia or Jan's assignment for next week, not mine today.