

October 27, 2002

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Ezra, normally regarded as the major biblical figure in the fifth century before Christ, merits that high assessment as a priest, a scholar, an activist reformer, and a man of prayer.

On the traditional and reasonable presumption that the Artaxerxes spoken of in Ezra 7:7-11 is Artaxerxes I (465-425), Ezra arrived at Jerusalem in 458, thirteen years before Nehemiah. His priestly lineage abundantly established (7:1-5), Ezra came from Babylon with a task clearly related to the official worship in the temple. Authorized by a letter from the emperor (7:11-28), he arrived with a retinue that included priests and other temple ministers (7:7; 8:2), as well as arrangements for finances and appointments for the temple (8:24-30). Subsequent events would demonstrate that the governance of the temple, especially the discipline of the clergy, was in need of a strong hand, and the hand was Ezra's.

Ezra was also a scholar, which the Bible indicates by calling him "a skilled scribe in the law of Moses" (7:6). The Hebrew word for scribe, *sopher*, is an active participle of the verb *saphar*, which originally meant "to count" but also, by extension, could mean "recount," or "narrate," and hence "write." When Ezra is identified as a *sopher*, then, that word is perhaps more accurately translated as "bookman," or even "man of letters." The rendering in the canonical Greek text, *grammateus*, suggesting "grammar" and such words, expresses the sense clearly. Indeed, there is a fairly strong tradition, which includes the scholarly Saint Jerome, that Ezra was an

editor of the Pentateuch (and author of the closing chapter of Deuteronomy, which records the death of Moses) while he was still living in Babylon.

Ezra was Jerusalem's major teacher of the Mosaic Law during the period after the Babylonian Exile. This is certainly how he is portrayed in one of the most memorable scenes associated with him, the public reading of the Torah in Nehemiah 8. Ezra had been engaged in editing the Torah, and the people wanted to hear it. They gathered to the east of the city, and as Ezra read the text in Hebrew, which by now was only a scholar's language, running translations were provided in the common spoken language, Aramaic. It was a scene of great emotion, with the experiences of conversion, remorse, and rejoicing mixed together.

Ezra was also an activist reformer. By temperament a resolute person, he was a confident and forceful leader who saw things in black and white, a man little given to nuanced views, someone who inspired trust by conveying a sense of certainty and command. He would have made neither a good discussion leader nor a reliable talk-show host.

Ezra was, however, a persuasive and decisive speaker, as we see in the great scene where he reprimanded those Jews, especially priests, who had married outside of their religion (Ezra 10). He gathered the offenders in the rain and simply overwhelmed them with the righteousness conveyed by his towering moral presence, persuading them to take steps deeply repugnant to very deep instincts and warmly cherished preferences. Under the barrage of steady rain and Ezra's firm invective, the crowd became completely cooperative. It was a turning point in Israel's history.

Before speaking to the people, however, Ezra fortified his soul with prayer

(Ezra 9). He made this prayer with uplifted hands at the time of the vesperal sacrifice, during which it was usual to pray in this posture (cf. Psalms 134 [133]:2-3; 141 [140]:2). We especially note in his prayer that Ezra did not separate himself from this sin of the people, though he himself had not committed it; the sin involved "us" (verses 6,7,10,13,15). Because of this solidarity he maintained with those for whom he prayed, Ezra was an effective intercessor. His cruciform posture during the evening sacrifice was theologically appropriate, because the Old Testament's evening sacrifice was a type of and preparation for that true oblation rendered at the evening of the world, when the Lamb of God, nailed to the cross, lifted His hands to the Father in sacrificial prayer for the salvation of mankind. This was the true lifting up of the hands, the definitive evening sacrifice offered on Golgotha, by which God marked His seal on human destiny. Ezra was, in this respect, a type of Christ our Lord.

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