

January 19, 2003

Second Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Abraham was a man of powerful prayer. This is hardly surprising, because the Scriptures call him "the friend of God" (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; Daniel 3:35 [LXX]; Judith 8:22 [Vulgate]; James 2:23), and God, like the rest of us in this respect, delights in doing favors for His friends. Thus, even after God declared to Abimelech, "Indeed, you are a dead man," He went on to promise that Abraham "will pray for you and you shall live" (20:3,7). And, indeed, "Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech" (20:17).

As God's friend, Abraham was blessed with what the Bible calls \*parresia\*, confidence or even boldness (Ephesians 3:12; Hebrews 4:16), in his approach to the Lord on matters of concern. Like the stalwart widow in the Gospel parable on this subject (Luke 18:1-8), Abraham could be rather persistent, perhaps a tad nagging, when he brought some point of concern to the attention of the Almighty. Accustomed to that mercantile dickering ever common in the Middle East, Abraham knew how to chaffer his way to a bargain, and he incorporated this skill too into his prayer, as it were.

An important feature of such "haggling" is that it must appear reasonable. Since the Lord Himself created the structures of reason, that is to say, Abraham thought an appeal to reasonableness a legitimate aspect of his discussions with God. He got rather good at making this appeal.

The evidence for it stands in Genesis 18:16-33, where "God's friend," fearing that the divine plan to destroy Sodom meant that his nephew Lot might perish, summoned all his mental resources to talk the Almighty out of it. He commenced by asking a perfectly reasonable question having to do with the nature of the divine justice: "Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" God wouldn't, of course; the question itself was rhetorical. Thus, Abraham the haggler already intruded his foot into God's doorway.

The point about the divine justice implicitly conceded, then, Abraham went on to advance another question having to do with

the idea of due proportion inherent in the very concept of justice. He submitted a reasonable hypothesis on the point, followed by an inquiry: "Suppose there were fifty righteous in the city; Would you also destroy the place, and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it?"

However sober this conjecture may have seemed as a speculative proposition, Abraham's argument, nonetheless, abruptly swung into a more persuasive mode, as though the Lord, inwardly weighing His options, needed an extra nudge in the right direction: "Far be it from You to do such a thing as this," Abraham entreated, "to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?."

Thus pushed on the point, God answered Abraham's hypothesis with an "if" of His own: "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city," He responded, "then I will spare all the place for their sakes" (18:26). "Aha," Abraham thought to himself, "the principle of the thing, at least, has been established; now let's get working on that price." After all, God had earlier expressed some faint touch of misgiving about the recent reports from Sodom (18:21), nor was Abraham, for his part, very confident that he could actually find the required fifty. That many righteous men in Sodom was awfully iffy indeed. God's friend determined, then, to chip away at that figure and see how much he could scale it down.

Any master haggler was familiar with the method. One began with a touch of personal deference and a very modest reduction in the sticker price: "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose there were five less than fifty righteous; would You destroy all the city for lack of five?" This new proposition, carefully worded, subtly ignores that the "lack of five" is subtracted, not from the total number of citizens in Sodom, but from the already low number of fifty. Nonetheless, the Lord accedes: "If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy it." Continuing thus, Abraham resolutely worked the figure down to only ten righteous. The Lord, patient through the process but still resolved about Sodom, finally just had to walk away. Abraham was, after all, His friend.

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