

May 11, 2003

Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearers

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Many of the biblical zealots, though certainly not all of them, are found in the books of Joshua and Judges, the two books that continue Israel's history from the death of Moses to the beginnings of the monarchy.

These two books, which begin with the conquest of the Holy Land by the Chosen People, are dominated by the imagery of warfare. It is not surprising that many modern readers are shocked and concerned about the great emphasis on combat in these books, the bloodshed, the conquest, the seizure of the property of others, and so forth. If taken literally, these two books might be used to justify all sorts of dreadful behavior, and some Christians deliberately avoid them for that very reason.

The arguments directed against the books of Joshua and Judges, run parallel, then, to those alleged against the "cursing psalms." In both cases, the question is legitimately posed: Are we not dealing here with a very primitive and immature level of religion that we should not pursue? Should not Christians, who have been enlightened with the greater grace of the Gospel, simply ignore such an early and more barbarous expression of religion?

It is arguably in connection with these problematic texts that we perceive most clearly the Pauline distinction between the letter that kills and the Spirit that gives life (Cf. 2 Corinthians 3:6). We Christians today, after all, are hardly the first biblical readers to sense a problem with too literal an application of these more aggressive parts of Holy Scripture. From the earliest periods of the Christian Church, in fact, great care has been taken to interpret the Bible's battles, bloodshed, cursing, and hostility in a more spiritual sense, imaginatively applying these narratives to the great struggle that Christians must exert to do battle with Satan who goes about the world as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). A good number of sermons and Christian commentaries on these problematic texts have come down to us from the early centuries of the Church, and all of them are marked by this same pastoral concern. The vigorous fighting recorded in Joshua and Judges, as well as the robust cursing of enemies that one finds in the Book of Psalms, were

habitually understood by those ancient preachers and commentators as symbolic of the considerable struggles involved in the daily Christian life.

To appreciate the validity of this traditional approach, I offer two reflections here.

First, the application of these historical events to the more spiritual dimensions of our life in Christ are not farfetched. Ancient Israel's struggles with the Canaanites and her other enemies were not simply political and military. Those were idolatrous cultures, devoted to the worship of demonic powers. The religion of these peoples was hateful to God. As offensive as this may sound to modern ears, Israel was involved in a godly task when it endeavored to destroy those cultures.

Although Christians are forbidden to employ such violent means to eradicate idolatry and perversion from our modern culture, we are no less obliged to dedicate ourselves to that struggle and that eradication. Indeed, the idolatry and perversions of ancient Canaanite culture sometimes seem rather tame in comparison with the demonic conditions that surround us Christians in the world today. At this very moment we Americans know far more about the evils of the Amorites, the atrocities of the Jebusites and the cruelties of Moloch-worship than was the case in those distant times. Philistines and Baal-enthusiasts are all around us.

Second, for far too long, and at much too deep a level, Christians have failed to take seriously their obligation to struggle against the forces of evil in their own souls. Too often the strenuous, biblically enjoined obligation to "work out our salvation in fear and trembling" has been dismissed as simply a species of works-righteousness. There is no question here, of course, of "earning" our salvation. There is, however, the elementary concern that in all things God be glorified, and often enough God is not glorified by how little concern we show for rooting out of our souls the various faults, habits, and dispositions that stand inimical to his grace. It was to Christians, after all, and not to pagans, that the Apostle Paul sent the warning not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). It is a mammoth perversion of the teaching of Holy Scripture to use the doctrine of salvation by faith as an excuse for remaining spiritually lazy and self-indulgent.

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