

November 16, 2003

St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Judges 8:4-9 records the incident in which Gideon, leading his three hundred exhausted and hungry warriors in pursuit of fifteen thousand escaping Midianites, requested loaves of bread from the cities of Succoth and Penuel. This request was entirely reasonable. Gideon's small force, by routing the Midianite army by the hill of Moreh (7:19-22), had effectively delivered all Israel, including Succoth and Penuel, from seven years of oppression (6:1). Now there remained only a modest mopping-up operation to subdue the last vestiges of the fleeing Midianite force, led by Zeba and Zalmunna. Providing Gideon's little army with a bit of bread was the very least to be expected from those cities which benefited from that army's victory.

Yet, the leaders of Succoth and Penuel refused Gideon's petition. The Sacred Text tells us why: "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" (8:6) That is to say, the men of those two cities, Succoth and Penuel, were afraid to take the chance. If they were to give bread to Gideon's forces and then Gideon should lose the battle to Zebah and Zalmunna, the Midianites would retaliate against the cities that had provided the requested assistance. (One recalls the vengeance of Saul against the priests of Nob, who honored an identical request from David; see 1 Samuel 21:1-7; 22:6-19.) In short, until the battle was actually over, the men Succoth and Penuel decided to play it safe. No bread, then, for Gideon's men.

This story illustrates the difference between those who play it safe and those who play for keeps. By boldly marching his three hundred men into the massive Midianite camp ("as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude"), Gideon had played for keeps. This story emphasizes the fortitude of his army by its contrast to the cowardice of Succoth and Penuel. Gideon won that battle, because the Lord took his side. In some of the battles that men fight on this earth, you see, God does take sides. Never, however, does He take the side of the coward.

This story also illustrates why the virtue of fortitude is necessary for all the other virtues, as a condition and catalyst. The history of moral philosophy insists that no other virtue is possible without the virtue of fortitude, certainly not justice nor charity. The man deficient in fortitude will not measure up in anything else. In the words of Ambrose of Milan, "In the mediocre soul there is no fortitude, which alone defends the adornment of all the virtues" (*\*De Officiis\* 1.39*). ). For this reason, the man least deserving of our trust, on any matter whatever, is the coward. Fortitude, wrote Thomas Aquinas, is "the general virtue, or rather, the condition of any virtue" (*\*generalis virtus, vel potius, conditio cuiuslibet virtutis\* - \*Summa Theologica\* Ia IIae, Q. 123, Art. 2*). Thus, the leaders of Succoth and Penuel, falling short in fortitude, failed in an elementary duty of justice and charity.

In Holy Scripture this fortitude especially characterizes the prophets, even more than the warriors. Indeed, the biblical warriors, like Jonathan, Jehoshaphat, and Judas Maccabeus, literally had a fighting chance of coming out of the battle alive. The prophets, no. Of the prophets it was said that the Israelites "beat one, killed one, and stoned another" (Matthew 21:35). So many of them sacrificed their lives in God's service that it became common to speak of "the blood of the prophets" (Revelation 16:6; 18:24; cf. Matthew 23:37; Romans 11:3; 1 Thessalonians 2:15).

Except for the power of God's Word, the prophets sallied forth unarmed. They had nothing else in their favor when they confronted their contemporaries, and most especially the men of power whom God called them to challenge. The prophets, then, possessed the supreme fortitude (*\*andreia\**) of which Aristotle wrote that "he is properly called a man of fortitude (*\*andreios\**) who is fearless in the face of a noble death (*\*ton kalon thanaton\**) and those things that lead to death" (*\*Nicomachean Ethics\* 3.6.10*). This is the example we behold in Samuel confronting Saul, Nathan accusing David, Elijah encountering Ahab, Amos reprimanding Jeroboam, Isaiah challenging Ahaz, Jeremiah standing up to Zedekiah, Daniel opposing Nebuchadnezzar, and John the Baptist facing Herod. These and the other prophets were men of fortitude, aware that they were not the masters of their lives. Having received their lives from God by way of stewardship, they committed

entirely to Him the day and circumstances of their deaths.  
This was the font and source of their fearlessness.

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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