

June 27, 2004

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of the goriest and most disturbing stories of the Bible is found at the end of the Book of Judges. Chapter 19, the first section of this story, commences with an adultery, goes on to portray a menacing crowd of sexual perverts in the city of Gibeah, tells of their gang rape lasting all night long, and then ends with the death of the violated woman and the dismemberment of her body. After this depressing start, the next chapter describes the refusal of the local population—the tribe of Benjamin—to take action against the perpetrators of the crime, the civil war raised against them in consequence, and the great slaughter occasioned by the war. The story's last section, which is the closing chapter of Judges, then chronicles how the victors of the war abducted four hundred virgins from another town not far away in order to provide wives for the defeated survivors. At the close of this dolorous tale comes a single verse apparently intended to explain the whole business: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25). This explanation is generally ascribed to a biblical editor favorable to the rise of Israel's monarchy. Yes, and let us agree that he made his point!

Inasmuch as this story was so shocking and violent, and because it portrayed ancient Israel in the least favorable light, we are not surprised that the other biblical writers tended not to mention it. The exception was the prophet Hosea, who evidently thought long and hard about it, for he referred to the account three times (5:8; 9:9; 10:9).

This is surely significant, because it is reasonable to suppose that Hosea's unusual interest in that sanguinary account had something to do with the circumstances of his own life. That story in Judges began, after all, with a wayward woman, a detail that the prophet certainly found familiar. Like the Levite in that ancient narrative, Hosea too was married to an unfaithful wife (Hosea 1:2-3; 3:1-3), about whom he brooded considerably, for whom he suffered much, and on whose behalf he was prepared to sacrifice everything.

I believe we will better understand Hosea, in fact, if we contrast his own attitude and behavior toward his wife with that of the Levite. I will suggest, moreover, that Hosea himself deliberately laid the basis of that contrast.

The story in Judges begins with the journey that the Levite made to retrieve his adulterous spouse. The prospects seemed promising at first: "Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back" (Judges 19:3). Had everything gone according to plan, he and she may have spent the rest of their lives in married bliss. However, the woman's father, at whose house the cuckolded Levite found her, several times persuaded the couple to delay their departure, and, when they did set out at last, they left so late in the afternoon that there was no chance to reach home before nightfall (19:4-11). Such were the circumstances that caused them to spend that fateful night in Gibeah, in the land of the Benjaminites.

As happened at Sodom hundreds of years before, a frenzied crowd of sexual perverts surrounded the house where the sojourners lodged, demanding that the visiting Levite be subjected to their lusts. This time, however, no saving angels came to the scene. As tension mounted and the menace grew, the desperate Levite at last handed his wife over to the violent and morbid passions of the mob. All through the night they raped and abused the woman, who at last crawled back, bleeding, and lay before the threshold of the house, her hands extended in vain supplication to the husband who slept within. There, about dawn, she died.

In the morning the heartless Levite found his wife, face down, prone upon the doorstep, and addressed her with only two words: *Qumi wenelekah*, "Up, let's go!" This command, as grim and ironic in context as cruel and callous in feeling, stunned the loving soul of Hosea when he read it. Whatever that unfortunate woman had done, she deserved infinitely better than this. This was not love. This was not the way a man treats his wife.

Since Hosea stands alone in the Bible by referring three times to that terrible incident, it is clear that it made a deep impression on him. It is reasonable to suppose that the prophet, in the midst of the many trials attendant on his own severely tried marriage, pondered deeply the moral peril exemplified in that ancient Levite, a man who had failed so egregiously to love, cherish, and protect his wife. Weighing well that awful warning, Hosea ever strengthened his resolve.

©2004 Patrick Henry Reardon

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

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php