

October 24, 2004
The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Though his appearance in history was, I suppose, a bit too early to warrant the term, "modern man" seems an apt expression for the biblical character Esau. At least we can call him modern in one large and defining sense: Esau, for the sole purpose of gratifying an immediate impulse, thoughtlessly betrayed an inherited treasure. The New Testament, in its only complaint against him, describes Esau as a "profane person . . . who for one morsel of food sold his birthright" (Hebrews 12:26).

First, Esau's underlying weakness was a lack of elementary self-control. As a rugged outdoorsman (Genesis 25:27), perhaps he thought of himself as a man of tough discipline. Clearly, however, the very opposite was true. Esau was unable to control his appetite even long enough for a meal to be prepared for him. Like a nursing infant, he insisted on being fed "right now," as though he would otherwise perish: "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" (25:32) Undisciplined Esau, that is to say, gave up his inheritance for a slight but instant gratification, and this is the first and radical reason why I call him a modern man.

Esau was also modern in a second way, in that he had no real sense of the relative worth of things. Because he had cheaply sold something material, he assumed that he could just as cheaply purchase something spiritual. Embracing the principle that man lives by bread alone, he nonetheless fancied that a higher benediction was still available to him, pretty much at the same price. Having lost his birthright for a bowl of soup, he planned to gain his blessing with a plate of venison.

There is a third display of Esau's modernity: He was slow to learn that the future is very much tied to the past. Some blessings-and among them the very best-are inseparable from birthrights, so that the reckless squandering of the one renders unlikely the acquisition of the other. Those, therefore, who condemn the past, have little chance for a future. Poor Esau! The New Testament describes his plight: "For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears" (Hebrews 12:17).

There is a fourth sense in which Esau appears as a modern man-the willful assertion of his individuality at the expense of his personhood. Persons, after all, are defined by their relationships to others, especially others in the past. Indeed, persons receive their very names from those who arrived in this world before them. There is no personhood without community and tradition, because persons are created when someone else, someone older, tells us who we are. Persons, thus, are necessarily formed within the context of an eldership; a person is someone who stands under the

authority of what Ken Myers has called "a community of binding address," in which those who go before have authority over those who come after. Personhood, therefore, requires a living tradition and a committed acquiescence in the authority of elders.

An individual is something quite different. His relations to others do not define him. He is, on the contrary, very much self-defined. He is someone "distinct from" others. The Bible required but few words to tell the trait of the individualist: "Thus, Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:34). An individual is a "self-made man." He does not derive who he is as a free and generous bequest from the past; he acquires it by his independence and self-determination in the present.

In these various ways of describing him as modern, I have in mind chiefly Esau's deliberate alienation from what could and should have been his own, and what he could and should have been able to bequeath to his posterity. His sin consisted in separating himself from tradition, the transmission of an intergenerational inheritance.

The character of Esau goes far to illustrate the phenomenon of "post-cultural man," a term coined by Christopher Clausen to identify the deeply isolated individual deprived of the wealth and wisdom of a living heritage. Emancipated from answering to the authority of the past, this post-cultural man is necessarily deprived of a fully human community in the present. He belongs only to the "now," reduced to a spiritually meager, less-than-human cohabitation in what Robert Bellah calls a "life-style enclave." Poor Esau, coming from nowhere, now lives nowhere and has nowhere to go.

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