

October 2, 2005
The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Hezekiah knew his history. Moreover, he understood it. In 722, when the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians, this crown prince of Judah was barely eighteen, but already he was mature enough to weigh the event on the scales of the past and to form some fairly adult resolutions with respect to the future.

First, concerning the past, Hezekiah reflected that exactly twelve generations and two centuries earlier a needless civil war, following promptly on the death of his distant forefather Solomon, had split in half the latter's realm. The northern tribes of that realm had asserted their twofold independence from Jerusalem—political independence from the covenanted Davidic throne and religious independence from the Temple and its priesthood.

The sins of the north, sown first in schism and soon in full apostasy, grew over the next two centuries to a grim harvest. Finally, in 722 the avenging scythe of the divine wrath came swooping down—as the prophets Amos and Hosea had recently warned it would—swung by the might of Assyrian arms. After the great masses of the population were slaughtered or deported over to the eastern half of the Fertile Crescent, only a remnant of Israelites was left of the Northern Kingdom. These had been sorely punished, but some of them, events would show, knew very well that they had received no worse than they deserved. Some of them, moreover, were now ripe for repentance.

Second, concerning the future, it was in respect to those battered remnants in the north that Hezekiah nourished special plans, plans that he was able to implement seven years later when, at age twenty-five, he inherited the throne of Judah (1 Chronicles 29:1). The new king, completing with amazing speed (29:36) the long-needed cleansing of the Temple (29:3-19) and restoring its proper worship (29:20-36), declared a communal celebration of the Passover to be held that very year in Jerusalem, and to this celebration he invited, not only all the citizens of Judah, but also those remnant cousins living in the north (30:1).

This was a bold stroke in two ways. First, the execution of this plan, so sudden and unexpected, demanded an unusual amount of preparation, requiring the Passover to be postponed for a whole month (30:2-3). Second, there had been no joint celebration of the Passover in more than

two hundred years. Would any of those northerners actually come to the feast?

So what happened? Hezekiah's effort was only partly successful, but it is instructive to observe the historical significance of that success. "However," the Bible says, "some men of Asher, of Manasseh, and of Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem" (30:11). That is to say, for the first time in two hundred years, pilgrims came to Jerusalem from Galilee.

It was Hezekiah, therefore, who was responsible for the spiritual and theological reunion of Galilee with Judah, after so prolonged a separation. These defeated Galileans had just experienced the real meaning of schism. They still bore in their mouths the bitter taste of separation. Given a month's notice, they hastened to Jerusalem, where the men of Judah welcomed them to reunion.

The observers of Hezekiah's Passover feast enjoyed themselves so much that, when the week of the Unleavened Bread was over, they decided to prolong the fun and festivities for another week (30:23). It would seem that, after being separated from one another for more than two centuries, these reunited Israelites simply could not get enough of one another's company, nor of the Lord's. The likes of this great festival, over which Hezekiah presided, had not been seen since the reign of Solomon. Such is the joy that descends on the people of God when schism and animosity are brought to an end.

There is a lesson here, of course, because this story exemplifies those blessings, good and pleasant, that abound when the brethren, united under the Lord's anointed king, live together in harmony, commonly served by His anointed priesthood. These blessings resemble that anointing oil upon the head, running down richly to saturate the high priest's beard, flowing further yet to consecrate the very fringes of his vestment. This blessing falls as the dew of the north, even from Mount Hermon, descending on Mount Zion, for there the Lord gives His blessing, life for evermore.

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