

December 11, 2005
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The historical perspective of the Chronicler was perhaps most poetically expressed in one of the final "Psalms of Ascent," those hymns chanted by the pilgrims to Jerusalem as they climbed the hill on their way to the Temple. This psalm, Psalm 132 (Greek and Latin 131), prays the Lord to "remember David/ And all his afflictions," those things he suffered to insure the service of the Temple. It goes on to associate closely the fortunes of the Davidic house with the blessings of the House of the Lord. If the Lord remembers David, the psalmist believes, then He will clothe Zion's priests with salvation and cause her saints to sing for joy. In this entire psalm there is not one word of anything that David accomplished except his provision for the Temple's worship.

If it is thus that Israel prays the Lord to remember David, it is because this is how the Lord's people themselves should remember David, especially as they tread those final up-hill steps to enter the Lord's courts with praise and thanksgiving. This psalm guaranteed that Israel would not enter the House of the Lord without thinking on the king who saw to its construction and provision.

This is exactly how the Chronicler too remembered David--as the true builder of Solomon's Temple, the spiritual leader who arranged its priestly and Levitical ministries, the master liturgist that composed its music and provided the singers and instruments to give it voice. Compared with these accomplishments, little else about David was worth remembering.

Moreover, and more important, the Chronicler's view of David is inseparable from his view of Israel. For the Chronicler, what made David different from all other kings of the earth is exactly what made Israel different from all other nations of the earth--the knowledge and correct worship of the one true God.

David did not inaugurate Israel's worship, of course. That task was assigned to Moses and his brother Aaron, and if the Chronicler seems to neglect that earlier part of Israel's liturgical history, it is because he knew that that story had already been told and was readily available. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers the Chronicler recognized the earlier proper treatment of his own chosen theme, and it was his

intention to carry that Mosaic story on to its later stages, especially as embodied in the liturgy of the Temple.

It is in this theme of orthodox worship that we perceive the historical perspective of the Chronicler. To his mind the deepest and most enduring fact of history is the correct, covenanted worship of the true God by His chosen people. Beside this, everything else is relatively insignificant. For him, all other aspects of man's history vary in importance by their relationship to this standard, for in the estimation of the Chronicler only the correct worship of the true God gives lasting significance to the deeds of men. This is the guiding principle manifest all through the narrative we are considering.

The Chronicler is hardly alone in this conviction about history and worship. More than two centuries later, for example, the Son of Sirach took the same view. "Let us now praise famous men," he solemnly began, "and our fathers that begot us" (Ecclesiasticus 44:1), and then he went on to trace the high points of biblical history in the characters of Enoch, Noah, Abraham and the other patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, David and Solomon, Elijah, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah.

But what, for Ben Sirach, constituted the crowning and glorious achievement of all this lengthy history? The worship in the Temple, which he describes in stirring detail in chapter fifty. Here we see him relishing the grandeur and beauty of the Temple liturgy, presided over by Simon the High Priest, as the sons of Aaron chant the praises of God, and all the worshippers prostrate themselves in adoration. Israel's history finds its culmination, fulfillment, and meaning in its worship.

Earlier in the same narrative, moreover, Ben Sirach prepared his readers for that grand scene in the Temple by describing David's provision for this worship by the arrangement of liturgical feasts and seasons, the composition of hymns, and the establishing of choirs to sing them (47:8-10). Ben Sirach's view of history and worship, then, seems identical to that of the Chronicler.

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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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

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