

October 15, 2006

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

History abounds in stories of men that showed great promise in their youth but ended their days in utter ruin. Some of these were laid low by events and conditions beyond their control, to be sure, but the downfall of others seems to have come from some personal flaw, some deep spiritual defect that ate away the content of their character and brought them to a bitter end. In the latter category no example, perhaps, lives so vividly in memory as old King Saul.

Who can forget young Saul's sudden, dramatic appearance on the stage of history? It was about 1020 B.C. that Nahash, the king of Ammon, laid siege to the Israelite town of Jabesh-Gilead, close to the Ammonite border. The citizens of Jabesh, thinking that Nahash wanted only an annual tribute for his treasury, promptly offered to comply. The Ammonites, however, had something more in mind. Apparently still chaffing under their humiliating defeat by Jephthe a few generations earlier, these invaders determined to seek reprisal by subjecting the citizens of Jabesh to a special punishment, bringing all Israel to disgrace. In the words of Nahash, "On this condition I will make a covenant with you, that I may put out all your right eyes, and bring reproach on all Israel" (1 Samuel 11:2). So much for international diplomacy.

Delegates were dispatched from Jabesh to see if anyone in the rest of Israel would come to their aid, and in due course these delegates found their way to the city of Gibeah. They arrived just about the time that young Saul was coming in from plowing his fields.

What we see next is a good illustration of Saul's personality and justifies our describing him as a strong executive type, blessed with a high energy level: "So he took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, 'Whoever does not go out with Saul and Samuel to battle, so it shall be done to his oxen.'"

This challenge, coming from a powerful man described as "taller than any of the people from his shoulder upward" (10:23), elicited the desired response: "And the fear of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out with one consent" (11:7). The siege of Jabesh was quickly relieved, Nahash's Ammonites were sent packing, and no one in Israel was in doubt about who was in charge.

History obliges us to contrast this glorious entrance of Saul with the pathetic figure of the king's later years, when he suffered from periods of debilitating depression (16:14), uncontrolled jealousy (18:8), mindless suspicions (20:30), and a paranoia so severe that he was obliged to sit with his back to the wall (20:25). Most pathetic of all, perhaps, was Saul's recourse to a sorceress on the very night before he fell on his sword, defeated at the Battle of Mount Gilboah (27:3-25; 31:1-4).

When we look for a cause of the downfall of Saul, we recognize that the king was laid low by the very qualities of his personality that had brought him to the throne. Saul began as a man of swift, executive decision-making, with a high energy level. He was blest with those traits, and he continued to develop them . . . until they destroyed him.

Men of that type, unless someone warns them of its attendant dangers, may be disposed to cultivate those features beyond any useful purpose. They may fail, therefore, to develop other virtues to complement and refine the native merits of their type. These virtues include elements difficult for quick, executive decision-makers, such as patience, humility, and the habit of objective reflection.

And here is where Saul came to grief. His recorded failures involved his assumption of an executive authority he did not have. This assumption is clear in his impatient effort to take on the service of a priest (13:1-14), his reckless disobedience in the matter of the Amalekites (15:1-19), and his endeavor to enforce a rash oath (14:33-45). Finally, it led him to the cold-blooded murder of the priests of Nob (22:6-19).

The downfall of Saul stands forever as a warning against playing relentlessly to one's strengths, especially if those strengths encourage impatience and the temptation to self-glorification. In the case of Saul, these very strengths turned him into the morbid, vengeful, superstitious old man who perished on the heights of Gilboah.

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