

November 18, 2007

First Sunday in Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Jesus our Lord, describing the last days prior to the second appearance of the Son of Man, spoke of "false messiahs and false prophets" as signs of that time (Matthew 24:24). In fact, as historians are prompt to mention, false messiahs and false prophets were the signs of Jesus' own time as well (cf. Acts 5:35-39; 21:38; Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.271-285).

Virtually all periods of subsequent history, likewise, provided further examples of false messiahs and false prophets, so that just about any age could feel justified in calling itself the "last days," and in most ages some folks have done so.

Our own time is hardly an exception. False prophecy, after all, includes any ideology that attempts to interpret the future on the basis of a flawed understanding of history. Likewise, false messianism includes any movement that attempts to hasten or bring about a future based on false prophecy. Now, a simple regard for the major wars and great social disruptions of the previous century makes it abundantly evident that those dreadful trials, some of which have but recently come to an end, were mostly spawned by the false prophetic movements and false messianisms that had managed to find a sufficient political agency.

It is arguable that no age surpasses the twentieth century in the social and moral harm done by false messiahs and false prophets. No other time in history produced so much political oppression, or so much destruction by war, or so many deaths by starvation, or such massive displacements of people-- an abundance of stark tragedy produced by false interpretations of history that had coalesced into stubborn political movements and institutions.

These include, for example, dialectical materialism, a political philosophy so corrosive of everything human that only with difficulty can we see it as the product of human thought. This attempt to read the future became messianic when it was adopted as the political program of large nations, particularly Russia and China. In its name, millions were imprisoned, millions starved to death.

Such too was nationalist socialism in its several forms. Germany's proposed "thousand year Reich," a demonic parody of the millennium of the saints, embodied a philosophy of political totalitarianism that was both prophetic and messianic. The mind is numbed with the thought of the human and social harm inflicted by such an ideology.

Arguably the most persistent form of false prophecy in all of history, on the other hand, is scarcely new. It comes from a man whose followers since the

early seventh century have referred to him simply as *El Rasul*, "the Prophet." Almost immediately that man's prophecies assumed a militant political shape that set out to conquer much of the earth at sword point. His false prophecies are still very much with us, and in the political faction that currently rules ancient Persia that movement has taken on, of late, a manifestly messianic character that is outright astonishing. No great gift of prophecy is needed, surely, nor heightened sense of alarm required, to foresee and fear serious trouble from this source in the not-too-distant future.

Now what does Jesus our Lord say with respect to false messiahs and false prophets? Don't listen to them, He says. Pay them no mind. Do not follow them. They will surely show wonders, as did the sorcerers of Pharaoh, and even the elect, He warns us, will feel the allure of their message. The word of false prophets and the programs of false messiahs will certainly be attractive, because they will address man's spiritual and social aspirations.

That is to say, false prophets and false messiahs will mimic the Gospel itself. False prophecy will present a form of "good news" about what lies ahead in human history, and false messianism will endeavor to bring it about. This explains why desperate men will take these things seriously. This is why they can coalesce into mass gatherings and alter the contours of political geography.

It is essential that we bear in mind that all of these things were prophesied by the unique Interpreter of history, the one Prophet whom we take seriously: "See, I have told you beforehand" (Matthew 24:25).

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