

December 14, 2008
Fifth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

During the weeks prior to Christmas, Holy Church stresses the Old Testament's expectation of the Messiah, a theme that She develops in the readings, the hymnography, and the selection of feast days observed during that season. Pursuing this intention, the Church chooses the first three days of December to send us to the late seventh century before Christ, by observing the feasts of three prophets of that time: Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.

Among the events that made the late seventh century a time of great upheaval in the lands associated with the Bible, it is not difficult to make the case that the fall of the Assyrian Empire was the most momentous. The corresponding rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, of course, also made that period very significant. One thinks of other developments as well, such as the Scythian invasion of the Fertile Crescent and the reigns of Psammetichus I and Neco II in Egypt.

Thoughtful people at the time doubtless pondered the significance of those things. From inscriptions left by Nebuchadnezzar II, for example, we know that he ascribed his success to the help of his Babylonian gods, "my lords Nebo and Marduk." For the most part, nonetheless, we are obliged to guess at what Assyrian, Babylon, Scythian, and Egyptian wise men thought about the gravity and import of those days, because their considerations have not come down to us.

That is to say, the reflections of those men---on the significance of the events in which their people played the major roles---were not assumed into history itself. Whatever their ideas on the doings of their time, those ideas utterly perished from memory, and memory is essential to history.

Whatever those men thought, surely none of them thought much about the insignificant kingdom of Judah. Nor had they a reason to know anything of three poets of Judah who wrote about the world-changing events of those days.

Yet, leaving aside Jeremiah, who dealt far more extensively with that period, the writings of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah provide history's clearest and most compelling interpretation of that era. Unlike the reflections of thinkers in Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt, those religious poets in Judah left interpretive writings that went on to contour the further transmission of history. Because Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah were "on the side of history," what they wrote about the events of their time became part of the ongoing life of history.

There is a great irony here, inasmuch as the prominent actors on the political

stage in the seventh century were not---in any ultimate sense---giving shape to history. They imagined they were, of course, but hardly more than mere traces of their accomplishments have endured. They are as though they had never been.

Israel's God alone was the Lord who gave significance to the events of the late seventh century, and to those three prophets He revealed His historical purpose. Consequently, it is through their eyes that those events have been seen in all subsequent generations of the ongoing community of faith. These generations are "on the side of history" and constitute that ongoing Israel which boasts, "God is our King from before the ages" (Psalms 73 [74]:12).

God's kingship over His people is, in fact, the key to their understanding of history. Zephaniah indicated this when he declared to Jerusalem, "the King of Israel, the Lord, is in the midst of thee" (3:15). God's presence in the midst of Israel, whether in judgment or salvation, is what put Israel on the side of history (Nahum 2:2; Habakkuk 1:12; 2:1-4,20; 3:17-19; Zephaniah 1:7; 2:3; 3:14-20).

Later on, Nathanael used Zephaniah's title for God, "King of Israel," to address Jesus, when first he met our Lord (John 1:49). It was his way of affirming what Philip had told him: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets did write" (1:45). He saw in Jesus the object of their historical expectations.

At each Divine Liturgy Jesus our Lord is addressed by this same title: "You are seated on the throne of the Cherubim, the Lord of the Seraphim, and *the King of Israel*. You alone are holy and dwell among Your saints." It is this abiding presence of the King of Israel in our midst that causes us to stand---with Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah---on the side of history.

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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
phri@touchstonemag.com

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

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php