

September 20, 2009

The Sunday After Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Because Baptism is likened to the Exodus, it is not surprising that the post-baptismal experience of Christians should be portrayed as a life-long journey of trial in the desert. Indications from very early Christian catechesis testify already to this portrayal (1 Cor 10:1-11; Hebrews 3-4).

In the biblical accounts of Israel's ancient desert trial, Christians mainly find warnings about what *not* to do: "Now these things became our examples, to the intent *that we should not* lust after evil things as they also lusted" (1 Corinthians 10:6) and "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, *lest anyone fall* according to the same example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11). The apostolic preaching remembered the desert wandering chiefly as a time of moral and spiritual failure (Acts 7:36-43; 13:17-18).

Indeed, most of the sources in Holy Scripture look upon Israel's time in the desert as a period of unmitigated tragedy. During those years Israel was ceaseless in her infidelities, constantly murmuring, tempting the Lord at every turn. This is the memory emphasized in the Psalms, and Ezekiel, during the Babylonian Captivity, summed up that tradition: "But they rebelled against Me and would not obey Me. They did not all cast away the abominations which were before their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt" (Ezekiel 20:8).

Other prophets took a more qualified approach to that same period of Israel's history. For instance, Hosea looked back to the desert years as a sort of honeymoon, following the Lord's espousals with Israel at Mount Sinai. Hosea even hoped for a renewal of that time, a sort of second honeymoon: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, / Will bring her into the wilderness, / And speak comfort to her. / I will give her her vineyards from there, / And the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; / She shall sing there, / As in the days of her youth, / As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt" (Hosea 2:14-15).

Hosea knew perfectly well, of course, that "with most of them God was not well pleased, for they were scattered in the wilderness" (1 Corinthians 10:5). Nonetheless, this prophet chose not to dwell on those sad thoughts. He deliberately turned his attention to the brighter and happier days, prior to the incident of the Golden Calf. To maintain the Lord's marriage to His people, he knew, it was important to remember the good times and try not to dwell on the bad.

One suspects that Hosea's decision in this matter was determined by the circumstances of his own vocation. Like the Lord of the Exodus, Hosea too had married a whore, a loose woman who would prove consistently unfaithful. Rather than dwell on those many infidelities, however, the prophet determined to fix his mind on the happier days, when the Lord commanded him, not only to marry that woman (1:2), but also to love her (3:1). Like the Lord with unfaithful Israel, Hosea kept those better times in mind, no matter how short they were.

A century later, Jeremiah adopted Hosea's perspective. The Lord, even as He was preparing for the destruction of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's own lifetime, once again recalled the honeymoon in the desert: " I remember you, / The mercy [*chesed*] of your youth, / The love of your betrothal, / When you followed Me in the wilderness, / In a land not sown. / Israel was holiness to the Lord, / The first fruits of His growth" (Jeremiah 2:2-3).

Though nearly all the adults who crossed the Red Sea subsequently perished in the wilderness, the Lord maintained His mercy toward them as they continued their way through the desert. They died for various causes, but not by starvation, for the Lord daily sustained them with bread from heaven. Truth to tell, their clothes did not wear out, nor the sandals on their feet (Deuteronomy 29:5). God "encircled him, He instructed him, / He kept him as the apple of His eye. / As an eagle stirs up its nest, / Hovers over its young, / Spreading out its wings, taking them up, / Carrying them on its wings, / the Lord alone led him, / And no foreign god was with him" (32:10-12).

In the Bible's last book, one sees this more positive aspect of the desert wandering in John's mystic vision of the Church threatened by persecution: "Then the Woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God" (Revelation 12:6).

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