

May 9, 2010

Sunday of the Man Born Blind

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The account of Ananias and Sapphira is arguably the most frightening story in the New Testament. We are scarcely surprised by St. Luke's comment that "great fear came upon all the Church and upon all who heard these things." In Luke's bright account of the grace of the Holy Spirit in the early Church, this story is something like a sunspot. And, like a sunspot, it may escape our notice. We should study it, nonetheless, for much the same reason that astrophysicists study sunspots: Whether we study them or not, they are real and affect the atmosphere in which we live.

We may reflect on the account of Ananias and Sapphira along three lines:

The first is their resistance to the Holy Spirit. This was, in fact, the explicit concern of St. Peter, when he asked Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" Peter repeated this question to Sapphira, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?"

In all the New Testament, this story may be our closest illustration of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, that radical state of spiritual depravity which puts the offender outside the realm of mercy (cf. Mark 3:9).

The Old Testament does not mention this sin, perhaps because blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was not yet possible. The full measure of this sin is found only in the Church. I mean, this ultimate offense---the repudiation of God's ultimate gift---is possible only when the gift has been received. Thus, the traditional sacramental discipline of the Church has always regarded the deliberate sins of Christians as more serious than the sins of pagans (Hebrews 10:26-29).

Our second line of reflection is this: the sin of Ananias and Sapphira included a self-seeking and rapacious attitude toward material things. It is instructive to observe the verb Luke uses to speak of their sin. Peter questions Ananias: "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and misappropriate, for yourself, the price of the land?"

Luke's Greek word for "misappropriate" is *nosphizein*, a verb rare in the Scriptures but used to refer to the sin of Achan in Joshua 7:1 (LXX). The scene describes how Achan violated the Lord's command to seize no spoils from the destruction of Jericho: "But the children of Israel committed a great trespass and misappropriated [*enosphizanto*] the condemned things, for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took the condemned things; so the anger of the Lord burned against the children of

Israel."

The offense of Achan was the first sin of the Israelites after their entrance to the Promised Land. Employing the same verb---*nosphizein*---Luke likens this first sin of Christians to that of ancient Achan. In each case there was the misappropriation of a blessing.

Our third line of reflection is this: the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was a conspiracy. Peter inquired of Sapphira, "How is it that you have conspired [*synephonein*] to test the Spirit of the Lord?" Men are bad enough when they soil their own consciences. Conspiracy is an advanced state of sin. Sin is particularly malicious when it exploits the social institutions that are proper to human existence. Sin reaches its full potential when it takes on a social and institutional form.

Among human institutions, of course, the most basic is marriage. So, if we have likened Ananias and Sapphira to Achan, we should liken them also to Adam and Eve. Our first parents did not sin simply as individuals. Their offense was conspiratorial; they formed a pact of infidelity to the Lord.

Adam and Eve bonded together in the attempt to keep God's will out of their shared life. Right from the beginning, therefore, they polluted the institution of the family. Ananias and Sapphira repeated that conspiracy, nor were they the last couple to do so. It is far from uncommon to find husbands and wives conspiring to keep the Law of God out of their homes. It is part of the legacy of Adam and Eve.

From the story of Ananias and Sapphira we should take away at least these three lessons: the utter seriousness of the Holy Spirit, the danger of a rapacious attitude toward material things, and the great danger of using human institutions-especially the family-as the medium and setting of conspiracy against God's Law.

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