

May 23, 2010

Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The biblical story of the meeting of Balaam and Balak (Numbers 22: 36-39) is structured on a psychological contrast between the two men: The impatience of the king of Moab is set at variance with the caution of the soothsayer from Pethor. This opposition, established immediately, endures as long as the two men are together (24:25).

Because Balaam delayed coming to Moab, Balak's greeting is already a remonstrance: "Did I not earnestly send to you, calling for you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?"

After this greeting---if greeting we can call it---Balak is eager for his hired soothsayer to start saying a bit of vigorous sooth against the recently arrived forces of Israel. This is, after all, what Balak is paying him to do. Balaam, for his part, is dubious about the whole venture. Although the king of Moab is eager for his services, the soothsayer is not confident His Majesty will be much pleased with the product. Consequently, at each stage of his dealings with Balak, Balaam feels it necessary to mention his misgivings.

All along, Balaam has been of divided mind about putting himself at the service of Balak. Having declined the king's first summons, he finally accepted the second, but only at a divine command. This circumstance, all by itself, would have made him cautious. Balaam was worried things might not be the way they seemed.

Moreover, along the way to Moab another experience reinforced his concern: Balaam got into a row with his donkey! When this loyal beast suddenly became stubborn and refused to proceed, Balaam began to beat her, at which point the offended donkey happened to mention---using all the correct verbs and nouns---that a resolute-looking angel stood before them on the path, with drawn sword. No, concluded Balaam, things certainly were not the way they seemed.

It was the donkey, then, that put Balaam on guard for his arrival at Moab. Indeed, there are significant parallels between the story of Balaam and his donkey and the account of Balaam and Balak: Balaam's triple urging of the donkey (22:23-27) prepared for Balak's threefold urging of Balaam (22:41; 23:13,27). What the donkey offered to the soothsayer, the soothsayer now offers to the king: a word to watch his step.

In contrast to Balaam's caution stands Balak's reckless enthusiasm. Difficult to discourage, the king pays no attention to the doubts of the soothsayer. He is so confident of the outcome that he refuses to consider the possibility of failure.

Balak combines boundless assurance and a fixed idea---a dangerous mixture if not diluted with a heavy dose of objective counsel. In his fixed idea, Balak is like Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*. In the irrationality of his overconfidence, he resembles "The Hairless Mexican" of Somerset Maugham. Balak is both. Is any man is so dangerous as him who fastens uncritical enthusiasm on a fixed idea?

The thing is worse if the man is a king. Indeed, our Teacher admonished us on this point: "Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?" (Luke 14: 31) Balak, in his campaign against Israel, marches forth in awful contrast to the wiser warrior Jesus depicted.

In the story of Balaam and Balak, nonetheless, the contrast between prudence and overconfidence is more than a moral parable, a biblical version of *Sense and Sensibility*. It forms the narrative setting, rather, for a theological and historical thesis: The true director of the drama is the Lord, who has guided Balaam---by donkey and angel---to deal with the likes of Balak. The biblical author is not content with a lesson in moral psychology. His message asserts, in addition, that the Lord of history uses such men as Balak to accomplish His righteousness.

Balak becomes a new Pharaoh, as it were, and a new Esau, to whose well-deserved disadvantage the Lord proceeds to manifest His wonders. In the fulfillment of His purposes, God is prepared to take such stumbling blocks as Balak and turn them into stepping-stones. Moab's king becomes what St. Paul calls a vessel of wrath made for destruction (Romans 9: 22). He has no one but himself to blame. Like Balaam on the donkey, he was warned.

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