January 20, 2008
The Second Sunday after Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although its existence cries out for a rational explanation, the world around us appears to contain enough irrationality to challenge any effort to explain it. Such is the problem encountered by what we call "theodicy," the argument that a good and almighty God is responsible for the existence of the world. In advancing such an argument, how do we account for the obvious presence of evil in a world that owes its origin to a God incapable of evil?

This problem is not an illusion. The presence of such evil is a matter of experience, its persuasion resting on empirical evidence from which there is no easy flight. Against this persuasion, on the other hand, stands the mind's rational conviction that all things outside of God must owe their existence to God.

This dilemma obviously makes life tough for monotheists, so it was to tackle the problem that the Manicheans postulated the existence of two gods, one authoring the good in the world, and another responsible for the evil. The Manichean thesis mercifully spared man's conscience the burden of ascribing evil to God.

God, however, seems not to be concerned about the ascription. Indeed, He rather makes a point of it, proclaiming in the Book of Isaiah, "I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things" (45:7). And as though to remove any lingering doubt on the question, the verb He uses here for the "creation" of evil is the active participial form of *bara'*, the second word in the Bible: *bere'shith bara' 'elohim*--"In the beginning God created."

In fact, the choice of this verb is distinct and emphatic. Bara' appears twenty times in Isaiah--more than any other biblical book and more than twice as often as Genesis--and it is never ascribed to anyone but God. That is to say, in this Isaian text God explicitly takes responsibility for the creation of evil, and He is apparently not much bothered at leaving our minds with the ensuing dilemma.

The biblical writers, convinced monotheists all of them, could hardly ignore the question. Among those that tried to deal with it were the authors of Ecclesiastes and Job, both of whom agonized on the matter nearly to the point of despair.

Far more serene and confident in his consideration of the dilemma was Sirach, who wrote in the second century before Christ. He had studied Job and Ecclesiastes, but he did not brood over the question as they did.

Indeed, to Sirach the answer did not seem so terribly obscure. When he thought of all that man considered evil--perilous weather, dangerous animals, the hazards of

war, and the like (39:29-30)--he regarded them as evidence of God's moral purpose in the world. He spoke of them as "spirits that He created for vengeance" (39:28).

Sirach was not a foolish or shallow man; he knew very well that the obvious evils in life--perilous weather, dangerous animals, the hazards of war, and so forth--are roughly common to all human beings, with scant regard to their moral state. Many tragedies of life are suffered by the righteous as well the wicked, and only a very unobservant person would imagine otherwise.

Sirach's insight is deeper than this. He makes no attempt to reconcile good and evil in an abstract way. When he regards the presence of evil in the world, he does not consider it *in se*, but only *quoad nos*--in terms of human experience. According to Sirach's completely existential approach, even evil is included among those things of which he sings, "All the works of the Lord are exceeding good" (39:16).

And what is evil's benefit to man? As Sirach sees the matter, the destructive side of this world inserts in the human mind a keener sense of God's moral resolve. The presence of peril encourages the cultivation of an honest conscience, honing a sharper edge on man's faculty of moral choice. The existence of evil, in short, places before man's eyes the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of Wisdom.

To appreciate Sirach's insight here, we may consider what our experience would be without the moral stimulus of circumambient evil. Had the merciful Creator not placed in His handiwork its harmful components, man would have far less incentive to mature as a moral being. The existence of evil inspires in the human soul a moral challenge, and this challenge is an essential part of God's word to man in the very structure of the created world.

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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php