

September 29, 2002
Cyriacus the Hermit

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Jewish high priest Simon II did not leave a big mark on history. In fact, his death in 198 B.C. was the sole occasion of Simon's career that the historian of the race, Flavius Josephus, bothered to mention, and this only in passing (Antiquities 12.4.10). Simon was less prominent than his father, Onias II (12.4.1), and a great deal less significant than either of his two sons, Onias III (2 Maccabees 3-4; Antiquities 12.4.11) and Jason (2 Maccabees 4-5). In short, as the world normally appraises historical importance, Simon was not an important man.

This fact renders very remarkable the high esteem in which Simon was held by Jesus Ben Sirach, the author of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, who eulogized the high priest shortly after his death. The book's final long section, which contains a detailed panegyric of Israel's heroes, begins with the words, "Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begot us" (Ecclesiasticus 44:1). Then, beginning with Enoch and Noah, it goes on to extol the deeds of Israel's prophets, warriors, kings, and sages throughout history: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, and the others. But the final and climactic figure in Sirach's long account is this otherwise obscure high priest, Simon II, to whose description he devotes almost a whole chapter (50).

And what was it about Simon that Sirach found so impressive? His solicitude for the divine worship, his refurbishing of the temple, his care for its appointments, the personal dignity with which he enhanced the solemnity of its rituals. The reverent grandeur of Israel's liturgical worship was of great moment to Sirach. Earlier in his historical panegyric he had paid detailed attention to the vestments and accoutrements of the Aaronic priesthood and its rites of sacrifice (45:6-17), in which he savored the mystic compound of holiness, beauty, and devotion. It was in the temple ministry of Simon, however, that Sirach supremely discerned what it meant to "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."

Sirach, one fears, would have scant sympathy with current trends to simplify and popularize the forms of worship in order to make them more "accessible," more "relevant," and

less "foreign" to the man on the street. Sirach would have scoffed at "seeker friendly" services that reflect everyday culture and "make people feel at home." Notions of this sort, had he known about them (which he didn't, of course, for they are very recent), Sirach would have considered monstrous. He knew very well - and in his description of Simon he would teach us - that worship involves dignifying man by elevating him up to God, not by celebrating what man already is on his own.

To "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" requires, first of all, holiness, and in this respect Simon the high priest was a model. Indeed, according to Sirach, "when he went up to the holy altar, he made the garment of holiness honorable" (50:11).

This holiness of worship is clothed in beauty, and beauty is simply truth as loveable, truth discerned in its loveliness. The perception of truth is the discernment of form, nor is there any beauty apart from form. This is why worship is formal, structured, patterned on a determined model. With respect to the form of worship, Moses on the mountain was told to make all things according to the heavenly pattern that he beheld. This sane prescription would safeguard Israel from the worship of Canaanite gods and from silly Philistine heresies like that which thinks "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Because every form of truth is heavenly and eternal, true liturgy is not simply old; it is necessarily timeless.

Sirach, in his account of Simon, has left us the Bible's finest description of Israel's worship. He gloried in the high praise of God according to the forms that God Himself prescribed. His eyes beheld the fire, the precious stones and beaten gold, the beauty of stately shapes and extravagant colors in vestments and sacred vessels. The air he breathed was laden with the richness of incense and aromatic oils, and his ears were filled with the silver trumpets and the chanting of the worshippers. He contemplated in the rituals of the temple the culminating adornment of creation itself. In Sirach's estimation, then, Simon's task was not to make his mark on history, but to serve in the dignified and solemn worship that transcends the mere events of men.

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