

October 20, 2002

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Isaac is one of the most engaging figures in Holy Scripture, probably because he is the most associated with the exuberance of laughter.

Isaac was named for laughter, in fact, because that name, formed from the verbal root *shq*, literally means "he will laugh." It is ever a marvel and a grace, for sure, to hear a little infant laugh, and I confess, for my part, a preference for the view that babies, when they come to earth, bring along with them the laughter of the angels.

In the birth of Isaac, however, the circumstances attendant on his unexpected appearance in this world afforded an even ampler ground for mirth. No one felt this better than his mother, Sarah, who conceived him at the age of eighty-nine, and the happy laconism that she delivered, immediately after delivering her son, was smartly to the point: "God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6).

Truth to tell, the laughter had begun already, a year and more before. Abraham, when first he heard the tidings, bent himself upon the earth, prostrate in a solemn posture of devotion. The gravity of his reverence, however, and the deep mood indicated by his downward frame, were more than faintly muted by the smile that formed around his mouth. How should a ninety-nine year old man respond, after all, on being told, with respect to his eighty-nine year old wife, "I will bless her and also give you a son by her"? (17:16) Unfamiliar with a better rule for how to receive this sort of information, "Abraham fell on his face and laughed" (17:17).

Sarah herself first learned the news while eavesdropping, from within the tent, on a conversation between her husband and the Lord whom he hosted outside. "Sarah your wife shall have a son," she heard the Latter say. Her response? "Sarah laughed within herself," asserts the Sacred Text, a reaction that she was a tad too quick to disavow when questioned on the matter. "I did not laugh," she insisted. "No," the Lord pressed the point, "but you did laugh!" (18:9-15)

Her laughter was prompted, of course, by the sheer incongruity of the proposition, because "Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing" (18:11). Did her laughter also betray a skepticism about the promise? A first reading of the text may suggest it did, because her laugh was accompanied by the remark, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (18:12) Nonetheless, our earliest Christian commentator on the passage evidently did not think this to be the case. He even counted Sarah among the heroes of faith: "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (Hebrews 11:11).

According to the full, Christian understanding of the Holy Scriptures, the joy of Abraham and Sarah at the promised birth of Isaac was burdened with the gold of prophecy, for his miraculous begetting foretold a later conception more miraculous still. Isaac was, in truth, a type and pledge of "Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). And Mary, mother of this Newer Isaac, having conceived Him in virginity just days before, made perfect her responding song of praise by remembering the mercy that God "spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever" (Luke 1:55).

Did not Abraham himself anticipate with joy the later coming of that more distant Seed? Surely so, for even our Newer Isaac proclaimed, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Like Moses (5:46), Isaiah (12:41), and David (Matthew 22:43), Abraham was gifted to behold, in mystic vision, the final fulfillment of that primeval word, "But My covenant will I establish with Isaac" (Genesis 17:21).

In the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons expressed thus the mystery inherent in the figure of Isaac: "Abraham, knowing the Father through the Word, who made heaven and earth, confessed Him as God, and taught by a vision that the Son of God would become a Man among men, by whose arrival his seed would be as the stars of heaven, he longed to see that day, so that he too might embrace Christ, as it were; and beholding Him in the Spirit of prophecy, he rejoiced" (Against the Heresies 4.7.1).

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