

March 30, 2003
Holy Cross Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Proverbs 30 contains the first of the book's three final collections of wisdom maxims, a collection called "the words of Agur, the son of Jakeh." The Hebrew text further identifies Agur and Jakeh as "of Massa," the same place in northern Arabia (Genesis 25:14; 1 Chronicles 1:30) as King Lemuel in the next chapter. Agur, the son of Jakeh, is not called a king, however, nor is he otherwise identified. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that he must have been a figure of some renown among the readers for whom the Book of Proverbs was intended, requiring no further introduction.

What we have in Proverbs 30 is a philosophical discourse delivered by Agur and recorded by his two disciples, otherwise unknown, named Ithiel and Ucal. Ancient places as diverse as China, India, Egypt, and Greece provide other examples of such discourses given by philosophers and transcribed by their disciples. One thinks, for instance, of the "Deer Park Sermon" of Siddartha Gautama.

Unlike Siddartha, however, whose recent enlightenment (*Bodhi*) prompted him to discern a relentless Chain of Causation in existence and to devise an ascetical system for dealing with it, Agur of Massa confessed himself completely bewildered by the whole thing: "Surely I am more stupid than any man, and do not have the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom, nor have knowledge of the Holy One."

Such a sentiment makes Agur resemble Socrates more than Siddartha. Socrates, we recall, once identified by the Delphic oracle as the world's wisest man, spent his life trying to prove the oracle wrong. He finally concluded, however, that the oracle must be right because he discovered all reputedly wise men to be just as ignorant as himself, except that they were not aware of being ignorant. It was as though, said Socrates, the oracle had declared, "Among yourselves, oh men, that man is the wisest who recognizes, like Socrates, that he is truly nobody of worth (*oudenos axsios*) with respect to wisdom." Agur and Socrates, then, both associated the quest of wisdom with a humble mind.

Whatever his resemblance to the wise Athenian, nonetheless, Agur more readily puts us in mind of the Psalmist, who

confessed to God, "I was so foolish and ignorant, I was like a beast before You" (Psalms 72 [73]:22) and "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it" (138 [139]:6).

Whereas the philosophical humility of Socrates was spawned of epistemology—that is, the accepted limitations of the human being's ability to know—that of Agur was inspired rather by cosmology, the sheer vastness of the myriad things God put into the world to be known: "Who has ascended in heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth?" Agur's are the sorts of reflections we associate with God's final answer to Job (Job 38-39).

With scant confidence in his own intelligence, then, Agur began the quest of wisdom by trusting in "every word of God" (*kol 'imrath 'Eloah*), which word he described, exactly like the Psalmist, as "pure," *seruphah*(Psalms 17 [18]:31). He then turned to prayer, the only explicit prayer in the whole Book of Proverbs, in which he begged God for a modest life, free of falsehood. The life that Agur craved from on high would be neither wealthy nor poor, in order to avoid both arrogance and desperation, either of which might lead him into sin.

Agur did not think very highly of his contemporaries, whom he described as disrespectful of authority and tradition, morally dissolute and socially irresponsible, insatiable in their appetites, and entertaining too high an opinion of themselves. If one looks closely, it is clear that his complaint against them had a fourfold structure. In fact, Agur was especially fond of maxims based on the number four: the four things that are never satisfied, four things too hard to understand, four things the world cannot endure, four small but wise animals from whom men could learn useful traits, and the four things "which are stately in walk."

Agur's was, in short, the simple, observant philosophy of a humble man, content to live in this world by the purity of God's word and a prayerful reliance on God's gifts, offending the Almighty by neither the food he put into his mouth nor the words he caused to come forth from it.

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