

September 14, 2003

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One does not have to live very long, I think, to perceive a certain perverseness about this world, life's strange but innate contrariness that cripples man's stride and corrodes his hope. Indeed, in terms of plain empirical verification, few lines of Holy Scripture seem supported by more and better evidence than St. Paul's testimony that "creation was subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20).

This dark sense of things is what the ancient Greeks called "tragedy," a subject they appear to have pondered more than most. The root word for this expression means "goat" (*tragos*), an animal commonly associated with stubbornness, mischief, aberrance, and even damnation (Matthew 25:32-33).

The Greeks observed that however slight the flaw in the fabric of a human life, implacable *tragodia* seemed ever able to spy it out and rip that life to shreds. They transmitted endless stories illustrating this theme.

In one such account, the hero Theseus, returning to Athens after slaying the Minotaur on Crete, neglected to alter his ship's sail from black to white, the color that his father Aegeus had instructed him to hoist, on his return, to signify his victory. When Aegeus, waiting on the shore, beheld instead the black sail atop his son's returning ship, he rashly presumed that Theseus had perished, and not waiting for confirmation of the matter, he flung himself in despair from a high precipice and was dashed to death on the rocks below. Thus, poor Theseus, though triumphant over the menacing Minotaur, returned only to find that a more formidable and relentless foe, impossible either to envision or resist, had turned his brief joy into lasting sadness (Plutarch, *Lives*, "Theseus" 22). The impetuosity of his father had conspired with his own slight and momentary inattention, to devour the substance of his hope. Once again, the smallest flaw in his life's fabric became the entrance point of tragedy.

But even without the dramatic pangs of tragedy, the Greeks realized, life in this world was usually hard, very often a struggle, even a kind of combat. Young people needed to learn this lesson early, a need that explains why Homer's *Iliad*, which portrays life as a battlefield, served as an essential

text of classical Greek education. The truer and deeper warfare portrayed in the *Iliad*, after all, is the struggle to excel, to be virtuous, *aristevein* (*Iliad* 6.208; 11.784). (Classical Greek education's other essential text was Homer's *Odyssey*, which sketches life as a journey.)

Classical paganism's greatest moral effort to deal with the toughness of life, including its tragic sense, was the philosophy known as Stoicism. The Stoic, realizing that most events in life-virtually all things outside himself-lay beyond his ability to control, resolved to bring discipline and serenity into his soul by putting aside his passions, bridling the reckless ambitions of his mind and will, and striving for inner freedom. One of the more notable Stoics, Epictetus, remarked that it was solely by abandoning the desire to master things outside himself that a man could gain a mastery within. Only this inner mastery could mitigate the trials and misfortunes attendant on life.

Holy Scripture, tracing all evil in the world, including especially death, to man's infidelity to God, normally uses the experience of evil as the occasion for calling man to repentance. This theme appears repeatedly in the Bible's historical and prophetic books. Job and Qoheleth, along with some of the Psalms, do include speculation about the structure of tragedy, but this line of thought remains exceptional in Holy Scripture.

More prominent is the theme of the Cross, which provides the key, not to unlock the correct explanation of evil, but to open a door to ultimate deliverance. It is the promise of the Cross that "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Short of that eschatological exchange of sorrow for joy, however, the Bible never essays to diminish the stark seriousness of human suffering. Certain pages of Holy Scripture, were they understood apart from themes like divine providence and the abiding primacy of grace, would be unbearably dark. The saints, in short, seem to live ever under pressure.

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