

July 24, 2005
Fifth Sunday in Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When I drew up the original table of contents for what became *Christ in His Saints*, it included some names that did not find their way into the published work. I had hoped to say something about King Hezekiah, for instance, and some characters in the Gospels.

These got elbowed out of the final version, however, by other folks who came to my attention later and pretty much demanded inclusion. There was Shamgar the Judge, for example, who warned me that I could keep him out only at the risk of a poke from his trusty ox goad. Recalling those six hundred Philistines whom he had thus dispatched, I complied and put him in.

I was not certain that all my "saints" would be acceptable to the readers, and even today I wonder on this point. So far, however, no one has complained, at least in my hearing, about the inclusion of the likes of Bathsheba among the saints. If challenged on the point, I suppose I will have to admit that I'm not sure when the lady's feast is celebrated. The liturgical calendar, alas, has never been my long suit.

Still, when I think of the "saints," I am disposed to be generous in counting them. The Bible encourages this generosity. Left to my own lights, I might not have included Barak and Jephthah among the saints, but clearly the Book of Hebrews does. (Even then, the author takes the rhetorical easy way out by announcing, when he comes to Barak and Jephthah, "What more can I say?" and then doesn't say anything. I confess that I have always found this one of the Bible's most disappointing verses. When I come to it, I always think, "Please, none of this 'the time would fail me to tell.' Relax. Take your time. Tell.")

One of the names on neither the original nor the final list in my little book was that of Balaam's ass. To tell the truth, I don't even remember the ass's name. In fact, I think maybe nobody even knows the ass's name. Is that why the ass does not have a feast day in the calendar? (I presume it doesn't.)

Come to think of it, would you call this fair? Consider, for a moment, the glaring injustice of the thing. St. George's horse is portrayed on icons in churches all over the world, but there is not a single icon, as far as I know, of that poor beast of Balaam. Balaam's ass could talk, and see angels, and all kinds of stuff. Tell me, did St. George's horse ever talk things over with St. George, or, for that matter, did it ever have a single useful thing to say? Did St. George's horse ever see angels? I doubt it. Let me ask you, and be honest, what did that horse ever do to get on an icon?

Although I am familiar with no Orthodox icons that portray the poor dumb beast of Balaam, the same cannot be said for Western art. I am thinking of Rembrandt's painting of the scene where Balaam's arm is raised to beat the ass, while beside him stands the angel with his raised sword poised to cut off Balaam's head. There is a great tension and urge of movement in the painting, inviting the viewer to wonder which one will strike first. Although the several princes of Moab gaze at the crisis in an abstract and uninterested way, most viewers of the painting, one suspects, will root for the angel.

It is at this point, of course, that the ass speaks, warning Balaam just in time that things were not quite as they seemed. A whole chapter before learning that Balaam is a visionary, Bible-readers already discover that his ass also knows a thing or two about visions.

I suppose that what I like most about Balaam's ass is that it did speak. Moreover, when it spoke, it made sense, which I think is what we are looking for in a talking animal. If a dumb beast is going to talk, the talk itself should not sound dumb. In fact, the ass had evidently done a lot of thinking, thinking of the kind that I might not have suspected, thinking about mercy, fidelity, reverence, and obedience. These were the very subjects that should have been on Balaam's own mind as he rode south out of Pethor that day (Numbers 22:21-35).

All right, calm down. I am also willing to consider the possibility that Balaam's ass was not a saint. For all that, nonetheless, the poor creature was nowhere near the ass that Balaam was. Even if I had pushed things a bit to include Balaam's ass among the saints, it would be less offensive than putting Balaam among the saints. Saints John (Revelation 2:14), Peter (2 Peter 2:15-16) and Jude (Jude 11), at least, seem to say as much. They are all critical of Balaam. Nobody blames the ass.

©2005 Patrick Henry Reardon

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