

July 31, 2005
Sixth Sunday in Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Few statements, I confess, render my mind more uneasy than the simple declaration, "Well, it all depends on how you look at it." When I hear this sentence, a sudden, anxious impulse at the back of the brain sends out the general warning, "Caution! You are about to hear something unbelievably stupid."

This response on my part is not natural, of course, in the sense of being a thing of nature. Such a reaction is hardly to be explained by the genes. No, mine is a truly "conditioned reflex," produced by years of monotonous reruns of nonsense. After about the millionth time of hearing someone say, "It all depends on how you look at it," followed immediately by some unbelievably stupid assertion, the conditioned memory simply links the two things together as components of a whole.

Not only is my reaction not natural, it is also not rational. That is to say, there is no logical or necessary connection between statements of unbelievable stupidity and the affirmation "it all depends on how you look at it." The two things are connected only in my experience.

Moreover, not only is my reaction not natural and not logical, sometimes it is also unwarranted. It is a fact that many things in life depend entirely on "how you look at it." For instance, the famous Mediterranean cloud that Elijah beheld from Mount Carmel was not really the size of a man's hand. It was a great deal larger, or Elijah could not have seen it. Making the cloud the size of a man's hand depended entirely on "how you look at it." The relative size of Elijah's cloud truly was a matter of perspective.

Phidias demonstrated this sense of perspective very well in the design of the Parthenon. When we visitors climb through the entrance to the Acropolis at Athens, we look across toward the Parthenon on the other side, and we see a building that appears to be perfectly symmetric. (Indeed, unless we deliberately advert to the fact, we may not even notice that we are looking at the Parthenon at an angle, not straight on. Phidias had no intention of our looking at it straight on.) From our perspective on the opposite side of the Acropolis, all the columns supporting the Parthenon appear to be the same size. That is the way Phidias designed it to be seen. When we walk over and inspect the building more closely, however, it looks very different. The columns are of very different sizes. They appear to be the same size only when viewed from the vectored perspective at the entrance to the Acropolis. This is simply art, and in art it is undeniably true that "it all depends on how you look at it."

Why, then, do I react so unnaturally and illogically to unqualified declarations that "it all depends on how you look at it"? As I indicated above, it comes from a burdened

memory. "It all depends on how you look at it" has become, in my experience, an all-purpose antecedent from which nearly any conclusion, no matter how unbelievably stupid, can be drawn. As I have heard the expression used, "it all depends on how you look at it" most often means, "There is no such thing as truth; everything is point of view." Or, "we cannot know reality; we can only tell our stories." There is nothing beyond interpretation. Truth is nothing so rock solid as the Parthenon. The only reality is personal or corporate narrative. Even if truth exists, we cannot know it, because every perspective is angled from a personal vantage or a society's shared point of view.

Although this absolutist claim for perspective is so modern as to be Postmodern, it is not without its precedents in the past. Among the ancients who contended, as a point of dogma, that "it all depends on how you look at it" was King Balak of Moab. This monarch combined a boundless confidence in the power of perspective with a dogged determination, no matter what the cost, to get the angle "just so." Balak knew exactly what he wanted to be seen, and he was persuaded that it would surely be seen, if only he could arrange the proper angle of the thing.

This is the spirit behind Balak's pathetic attempts to make Balaam look at Israel's army "just so." Three times he insists that Balaam stand here or stand there, on each occasion gaining a different viewpoint. Balak knows what he wants Balaam to behold, and, if he can get Balaam standing in exactly the right place, he will behold it (Numbers 23:3,13,27). After all, truth, as everyone knows, enjoys no independent existence. It all depends on how you look at it.

Balak's effort doesn't work, of course. Poor, disappointing Balaam keeps seeing what he sees. No matter in which direction he turns, before him stand the awesome, invincible forces of Israel still holding the field, utterly undeniable, powerful as the Parthenon. No slanting of the story, no contrived vectoring of the light, can vanquish the irreducible claims of the truth, and at last Balak pleads with Balaam to break it off, please, and go home (24:10-11).

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