

September 11, 2005
Sunday Before the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Sometime before the death of King Uzziah in 742, the prophet Amos traveled from Tekoa in Judah (Amos 1:1) to the shrine at Bethel in Israel, where he delivered a series of oracular prophecies. We know that Amaziah, the priest in charge of that shrine, was less than receptive to Amos, whose prophetic tone he found a bit on the negative side (7:10-13), and one suspects that Amaziah's reaction may have represented a majority view in Samaria. Did anyone up there, really, give the message of Amos a sympathetic hearing? I am going to suggest that some folks did.

Among the criticisms made by Amos on that occasion was the ill treatment of prisoners-of-war, even their sale into slavery. Several wars in the region were in process during that period (1:3,11,13; 2 Chronicles 26:7-15), but Amos directed his censure about prisoners-of-war against only two peoples, the Philistines, who actually took the prisoners, and the sea-going Phoenicians, who made delivery of the slaves (Amos 1:6,9). Since we know that the Philistines were fighting Judah at the time (1 Chronicles 26:6), it is reasonable to conclude that the prisoner/slaves in question were Amos's own fellow citizens from Judah.

Now, when Amos condemned this cruel commerce in war-slavery sometime just before 742, there is evidence to believe that this condemnation effectively smote some consciences up in Samaria. Here is the evidence:

In 735, not long after this preachment and just as Uzziah's son, Jotham, was dying, the Syrians formed a league with Samaria to invade Judah ((2 Kings 15:37-38). Their threat, we know, was directed against Judah's new and very young king, Ahaz, Uzziah's grandson (Isaiah 7:1-2). In the course of their invasion of Judah, the Syrians and Samaritans captured numerous prisoners-of-war (2 Chronicles 27:5-8).

What happened next, however, is refreshing to find among the usually cruel annals of warfare. When the forces of Samaria returned with their prisoners from Judah, "a prophet of the LORD was there, whose name was Obed; and he went out before the army that came to Samaria, and said to them: 'Look, because the LORD God of your fathers was angry with Judah, He has delivered them into your hand; but you have killed them in a rage that reaches up to heaven. And now you propose to force the children of Judah and Jerusalem to be your male and female slaves; but are you not also guilty before the LORD your God? Now hear me, therefore, and return the captives, whom you have taken captive from your brethren, for the fierce wrath of the LORD is upon you'" (2 Chronicles 28:9-11).

Perhaps to the prophet's own surprise, and certainly to the surprise of those familiar with military practice in the eighth century before Christ, the Samaritans listened to Obed. After all, this was their second prophetic warning about prisoners-of-war

within a decade and, anxious not to share the fate of the Philistines and Phoenicians, the Samaritans decided that the imprisonment must proceed no further (28:12-14). That is to say, I suppose, these Samaritans determined to become "good Samaritans."

If that remark seems merely playful, let us examine the description in detail: "Then the men who were designated by name rose up and took the captives, and from the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them, dressed them and gave them sandals, gave them food and drink, and anointed them; and they let all the feeble ones ride on donkeys. So they brought them to their brethren at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria" (28:15).

Not only did the Samaritans clothe the prisoners, we observe, but they also anointed them, evidently for their wounds, and set the weaker among them on pack animals to ride back home. Home, of course, was none other than Jericho, the border city for their repatriation to Judah.

If this scene sounds familiar, surely it is because it puts us in mind of a man that "went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead." Desperate, surely, was this man's plight except that a passing Samaritan "went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him" (Luke 10:30-35).

The road down to Jericho, in short, knew all about good Samaritans some eight hundred years before the parable.

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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
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