

September 18, 2005
Sunday After the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

King Hezekiah (716-687), because of the relatively short life of his hapless father Ahaz, was a young man--only twenty-five--when he assumed the throne of Judah (2 Kings 18:2).

The new king, moreover, inherited a mess. His kingdom was impoverished by his father's irresponsibility, and much of the Holy Land lay in ruins from local wars and a recent invasion from afar. Six years earlier, in 722, the Assyrians had destroyed the Kingdom of Israel, to Judah's north, and then deported the great masses of its people to regions over in the far end of the Fertile Crescent.

Furthermore, Hezekiah well knew that his own father had been the culprit responsible for earlier inviting the Assyrians to interfere in the politics of Holy Land (2 Chronicles 28:16-21). The problem was part of his father's own legacy, then, and the new king himself was obliged to pay annual tribute to Assyria, further impoverishing his realm.

Over the next two decades, however, Hezekiah undertook measures toward resisting that ever-looming menace from the east. First, he endeavored to re-unite the remnant of Israelites in the north with his own throne in Jerusalem, thus enlarging his realm by restoring the borders of David's ancient kingdom. In this effort he was somewhat successful (30:1-11).

Second, Hezekiah strengthened Jerusalem's defenses by cutting an underground conduit through solid rock, so that water could be brought secretly into the city from the Gihon Spring. This remarkable feat of technology, unearthed by modern archeology, is not only recorded twice in the Bible (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:30) but also in the contemporary Siloam Inscription. In this effort Hezekiah was very successful.

Prior to either of these efforts, however, Hezekiah initiated a religious reform, convinced that the nation's recent apostasy under his father Ahaz was the root of Judah's unfortunate plight. Thus, he began his reign by purifying the Temple, lately defiled by pagan worship (2 Chronicles 29:3-19), in order to restore the edifice to the proper service of God (29:20-36).

Unlike the unbelieving Ahaz, who treated a spiritual dilemma as merely a political problem, to be addressed by political means, Hezekiah was determined to regard the spiritual dilemma for exactly what it was. Indeed, Hezekiah's programmatic reform maintained the proper priority indicated by our Lord's mandate that we "seek first the Kingdom of Heaven." Nothing else in Judah's national life, Hezekiah believed, would be correctly ordered if anything but the interests of God were put in

first place. What was first must emphatically be put *there*, not second or somewhere else down the line.

This priority of God's Kingdom, for Hezekiah, involved more than the cleansing of the Temple and the restoration of its worship. It also meant the renewal of spiritual wisdom, which explains the new king's interest in preserving Israel's ancient wisdom literature (Proverbs 25:1). Such a pursuit of wisdom also had to do with the priority of the Kingdom of Heaven.

To Hezekiah, however, the "first-ness" of God's Kingdom was not a mere point of sequence but a matter of principle. The quest of the Kingdom was first, not only in the sense that it preceded everything else, but also in the sense that it laid the basis for everything else.

The foundation of an edifice, after all, is put down prior to the rest of the edifice, not simply because that is the usual and accepted order. It is the usual and accepted order because it is the only conceivable order. Indeed, the foundation of something belongs, in this sense, to a *different* order, because the rest of the thing is impossible without that foundation. It is the basis that supports the whole enterprise.

And this is what is meant by the priority of a principle. Such priority is more than mere succession--of getting things in the correct order. What is first pertains to another order--the order of principle. This is so plain a fact that it should not even have to be said. Yet, Jesus did say it, recognizing that some folks tend not to notice the obvious.

Just as that man is thought insane who imagines that he can first build a house and then lay its foundation, so is he insane to pretend to arrange a well-ordered life and then later start on the foundation of it. Seeking God's Kingdom is the real foundation of the well-ordered life, and the Lord warns against building on any other.

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