

March 11, 2007

Third Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

During the three years (apparently 52-55) of his extended ministry in Ephesus (Acts 20:31), we know that the Apostle Paul spent a lot of time conducting daily apologetical and catechetical classes in a rented hall. These instructions, which Paul started after he had been in the city three months (19:8), lasted another two years (19:9-10). Thus, we can account for only 27 months of the three years Paul resided at Ephesus.

Apparently some of those other months were spent in jail. Paul thus wrote of having fought "wild beasts at Ephesus," an expression that he understood as a metaphor (1 Corinthians 15:32; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 and the public turmoil described in Acts 19:21-41). I believe it was from jail in Ephesus that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Philippians (cf. Philippians 1:14-16), one of four letters he sent during those three years (the others being Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and, it appears to me, 1 Timothy).

Daily instruction and the composition of epistles, however, were hardly the sum of Paul's labors during that prolonged stay at Ephesus. He also supervised the missionary efforts of his companions, whom he dispatched to evangelize the neighboring cities of Asia Minor and Phrygia. These outlying missions may have included Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, but they certainly did include Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae.

These three towns in the Meander valley were evangelized by a missionary named Epaphras, a native of Colossae, whom Paul held in high regard. Writing to the Colossians some years later, the Apostle described Epaphras as "a bondservant of Christ" (Colossians 4:12), "our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf" (1:7). In the same epistle, Paul said of Epaphras, "I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis" (4:13). It is evident that the evangelism of these three cities was the mission assigned to Epaphras.

Among those whom Epaphras converted at Colossae were Philemon, his wife Apphia, and their son Archippus (Philemon 1-2). For these and the other Colossian believers, wrote St. Paul, Epaphras was "always laboring fervently . . . in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (4:12).

Epaphras, like Titus and other early missionaries, is not mentioned by name in the Acts of the Apostles, nor would we know of him except for Paul's own testimony. Indeed, from two of the three epistles that Paul sent during his two years of imprisonment at Caesarea (Acts 24:27), we learn that Epaphras was in prison *with* him during that time (roughly 59-61). The Apostle wrote, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you" (Philemon 23; cf. Colossians 4:12).

Thus, Epaphras was on hand at Caesarea when Paul received another Colossian visitor, the runaway slave Onesimus, whom the Apostle then converted, baptized, and sent back to his master (Philemon 10,12). When this slave returned to Colossae, he was accompanied by yet another Asian missionary, Tychicus, who had been Paul's companion ever since he began the long journey that eventually brought him to prison in Caesarea (Acts 20:4).

Tychicus, when he went to Colossae with news of Paul and Epaphras, bore the appropriate greetings. The Apostle wrote, "Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts" (Colossians 4:7-8). Tychicus and Onesimus, now called "a faithful and beloved brother," would make known to the Colossians "all things which are happening here" (4:9).

Tychicus would also carry with him three epistles from Paul: to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Laodiceans (this last surely to be identified with what we call the Epistle to the Ephesians—cf. Colossians 4:16).

Paul himself had apparently never visited Colossae ("I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh"—Colossians 2:1), but the Colossians still formed a properly Pauline church because of the dedicated zeal and missionary efforts of Epaphras, who represented the apostolic ministry of Paul in the cities of the Meander valley.

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