

December 23, 2007

Sixth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It would be a comfort to think that all those who go up to the house of the Lord are led there by the Holy Spirit. It would also be an illusion.

Even if experience did not testify that people sometimes attend worship with the most deplorable attitudes and for the worst possible reasons, Holy Scripture itself would caution us to realism on the point.

An early example, I suppose, is Peninnah, Elkanah's "other wife," who used the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh as an opportunity to render life miserable for barren Hannah. This latter she provoked severely, says the Sacred Text, "to make her miserable." The provocation was not unintentional, we are assured, nor did it happen only once: "So it was, year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, that she provoked her; therefore she wept and did not eat" (1 Samuel 1:6-7). It is easy to picture Peninnah looking forward to that annual pilgrimage with the family; it was perhaps her favorite time of the year, providing her the forum for feeling superior and spreading discouragement.

Now, as it happened, the God who brings good out of evil caused everything to work out well for Hannah, and the story soon turns into an account of grace and divine visitation. Still, there was a serious pastoral problem at Shiloh, and I suspect more than one worshipper at the time wished the priest Eli, pointing to Peninnah, would suggest to Elkanah, "When your family comes next year, brother, why not leave Miss Picklepuss at home?" Perhaps his failure to do so should be counted among Eli's several pastoral shortcomings.

Oh that Peninnah was history's last recorded example of a surly, mean spirited individual using the time of divine worship as the occasion to make someone else feel wretched and forlorn.

Not so, however. Another is the Gospel story of "the ruler of the synagogue," a singularly unattractive, grumpy person who objected to Jesus' healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath. In the midst of the spontaneous praise of God that ensued upon that gracious deed, this particular bellyacher felt it his duty to sound a warning to the congregation about liturgical proprieties: "There are six days on which men ought to work," he declared, "therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day" (Luke 13:14). Quick to pass judgment on others and blinded by his own vicious, miserly spirit, this religious leader was unable to recognize the divine presence and the outpouring of grace.

Devoid of mercy, we notice, he was also without courage. Consequently, instead of confronting Jesus directly, this coward had recourse to what had always worked for him in the past--he harangued the congregation. And this time about the woman herself!

It is often said--and it is said, I think, more often than is true--that churches are full of hypocrites. Here was one occasion, however, when the Lord really did use that noun to describe someone in the place of worship. Unlike Eli, who failed to give a proper pastoral admonition to Peninnah, Jesus turned His not amused attention to this so-called ruler of the synagogue: "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it?"

The Lord's indignation in this setting, which was scarcely untypical of Him (cf. Mark 3:5), suggests that a pastor's patience in these circumstances should not be unlimited. Peninnah and the ruler of the synagogue behaved like wolves, not like sheep. They needed to be treated like wolves. The Lord gave an example of the proper pastoral response to situations in which an individual apparently comes to church for the purpose of making other people in church miserable. Such folk need either to repent, right now, or stay home.

I began these comments by mentioning that not all churchgoing seems to be prompted by the Holy Spirit, an impression that opens the possibility of other spirits at work. One hates to consider this possibility, but there is evidence that some individuals are led to congregations for the demonic purpose of doing harm. Very early both the *Didache* and *The Travels of Egeria* mentioned the testing needed to settle that question. When a pastor admits someone into the congregation, we presume he is able to distinguish a sheep from a wolf. Indeed, we very much depend on it.

©2007 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