

**May 4, 2008**

**St. Thomas Sunday**

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

As though the news about the empty tomb were not adequately sensational, Holy Mother Church decides every spring to heighten the excitement by flinging Herself into a book of adventure stories.

It is all rather embarrassing, I suppose---this somewhat girlish impulse to read a thriller---but there you have it. As soon as the weather turns warm and tender buds appear on the trees, the Church indulges a maidenly flair for literary excitement: stirring tales of exploits, travels, and escapades.

She always comes back, moreover, to the same book, because it is an engaging and unusually energetic work, its mere 32 pages crammed with sustained drama, near escapes, and not a few *beaux gestes*.

Perils lurk on every page. No sooner does one character, for example, perish from stoning than another is hustled off in the dead of night to elude a kidnapping plot. The minute a civic riot is put down in one place, a lynch mob begins to gather somewhere else. Washed ashore after suffering shipwreck, the survivor is promptly bitten by a poisonous snake. There is a famine, and there is an earthquake, and there is constant activity, but there is never a dull page.

There is also incessant conflict in this little book, complete with jealousies, reprimands, ill will, accusations, and rash judgments. One group indicts another for neglecting the widows. Synagogue meetings are violently disrupted by gangs from neighboring towns. Two of the major characters are split apart in explosive disagreement over a third. Soldiers race forward to save a man from being pulled to pieces by a crowd.

This last item is rather standard, because there is likewise an uncommon amount of violence in these pages. Of one man we are told, "he was eaten by worms and died," and of another it is said, "he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out." This is pretty rough stuff to return to every spring.

On the one occasion in the story when someone dies a "normal" death, she is miraculously raised up before they can finish the funeral. There you have it.

A man is lowered over a city wall in a basket or bundled off to prison, invariably on trumped up charges and suborned perjury, but no matter, because the book includes two rather impressive jailbreaks. After the first of these, the guards are quickly executed. A violent death is the standard fare.

And then there are the speeches. These are delivered in the temple of Jerusalem, in the public square at Athens, in the amphitheater at Ephesus, in the marketplace at

Philippi---in a courtroom, in a centurion's home, in a secret upper room, on board a ship, in a hall rented for the purpose, and in various synagogues and assemblies in coast towns of the Mediterranean.

However, in accord with the book's emphasis on action, the speeches themselves do not always end well; in fact, before the longest of them is over, the speaker is rushed upon and put to death. In one place the listeners are so impressed they mistake the speakers for gods. Realizing their error the next day, they immediately stone them.

Every manner of exotic and improbable individual shows up from an unlikely place. There is a chariot-driven Ethiopian, for instance, riding on the Gaza Road, shortly before an Asian businesswoman arrives on the banks of the Gangites in Macedonia. Somebody from Alexandria puts in an appearance at Ephesus before sailing off to Corinth. A wild sorcerer shows up at Salamis, and an unscrupulous religious shyster intrudes himself at Samaria. Without warning or explanation, the book's narrator abruptly joins the story over halfway through, attaching himself to a party about to sail for Samothrace. He very soon leaves his place in the story, however, to return again some chapters later for the trip back to Troas.

Sea travel, in fact, plays a prominent role in this book. There are voyages to Cyprus, to Asia Minor, to Greece, to Rhodes, to Phoenicia. Most of all there is the long, dangerous, and adventurous trip to Italy, complete with a shipwreck on the coast of Malta after a storm that drove the vessel all the way from Crete. What do you expect? It's that sort of book.

Anyway, Mother Church has indulged this annual craving over many centuries, reading the action-packed book again as soon as the Lenten fast is over. Perhaps She thinks it Her due reward for so much ascetical effort. It appears to have done Her no serious harm. One suspects, rather, it renews Her youth.

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