

February 28, 2010

Second Sunday of the Great Fast

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The period of Israel's judges---from the death of Joshua to the anointing of Saul---is divided into two biblical records: the Book of Judges and the opening chapters of 1 Samuel. The early editors of the Old Testament, who determined the division of this material, were doubtless guided by a sense that the ministry of Samuel provided an essential narrative hinge between the judges and kings of Israel. It seemed to those editors that Samuel's importance lay less in his sequence with the other judges than in his preparation for the monarchy. Israel's memory tied him closer to Saul and David than to Ehud and Jephthah.

If we look for comparisons between the ministries of Samuel and Israel's other judges, Deborah arguably provides the clearest resemblance. Neither she nor Samuel was remembered as a warrior, though each of them inspired others---Barak and Saul---to combat. The ministries of both Deborah and Samuel, moreover, were associated with Ramah, where the Israelites gathered to consult them (Judges 4:5; 1 Samuel 7:17).

Also, Samuel's mother, Hannah, came---like Deborah---from "the mountains of Ephraim." The biblical editors suggest this connection by placing the canticles of Deborah and Hannah near the beginnings of their respective books.

On the whole, nonetheless, the Bible's portrayal of Samuel disposes one to think of him in terms of contrast---rather than comparison---with the other judges, most of whom were charismatic warriors. Although Samuel could scarcely be called a pacifist (cf. 1 Samuel 15:32-33!), the Bible does not describe him as either leading armies, like Barak and Gideon, or, like Shamgar and Samson, single-handedly massacring large numbers of Israel's enemies. We readers, recalling Samuel as a small child asleep in the shrine at Shiloh, tend to associate him more with worship than with warfare (cf. 7:9; 10:8; 13:7-11).

Indeed, these dissimilarities might cause us to forget that Samuel actually lived during that period of which Holy Writ declares, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). A closer inspection of Judges and 1 Samuel discloses striking points of resemblance and continuity in the material of the two books. For example, the depraved life of Eli's sons at the beginning of 1 Samuel continues the theme of unworthy Levites in the closing chapters of Judges. In 1 Samuel, likewise, two early crises involved incursions by the Ammonites (ch. 12) and Philistines (chs. 4-7), both enemies having been earlier confronted by---respectively---Gideon and Samson.

The mothers of Samson and Samuel provide another correspondence between these two books. Both women, described as barren (Judges 13:2; 1 Samuel 1:5), conceive sons whose births are divinely prophesied. In each case, the mother consecrates her son as a Nazirite.

If Samuel is regarded as the link between Israel's judges and kings, his mother represents the theological principle of the transition. We may say that the drama of salvation presented in the Book of Samuel was predicated on the faith and prayer of Hannah: "I rejoice in Your salvation" (2:1).

God's fulfilled promise to Hannah provided the initial divine assurance for the throne of David. Reflecting on the Lord's mercy in her regard, the mother of Samuel proclaimed, "He will give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed" (2:10). In declaring that "by strength no man shall prevail" (2:9), she asserted the principle by which David would defeat Goliath: "the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands" (17:47).

The faith and prayer of Hannah introduce the story of God's mercy in the covenant with David. When she affirmed that God would "guard the feet of His saints" (2:9), Hannah voiced a prophecy fulfilled in David (2 Samuel 22:34), just as the final days of Saul dramatized her warning that "the wicked shall be silent in darkness." When, in the sundry battles of the Book of Samuel, we read of "the Lord of armies" fighting on the side of David (1 Samuel 17:45; 2 Samuel 5:10; 6:2,18; 7:26,27), we recall that Hannah was the first to invoke Him by that name (1 Samuel 1:11).

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