

May 30, 2010

All Saints Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

As news spread, throughout Israel, of young David's forced exile in the Judean Desert, not a few Israelites settled their minds to join him there. Among that number--understandably--were David's relatives, whose very lives were in peril from the malice of Saul. Likewise, others---including debtors, malcontents, and political outcasts---gladly threw in their lot with this dashing young renegade in the desert. Rather quickly their number grew from 400 (1 Samuel 22: 1-2) to 600 (23: 13), whom their new leader formed into a scrappy and efficient guerilla force.

Because of the high adventure involved in his exile, David especially attracted the bold and saucy, the natural risk-takers, men able to sneak up quietly, hit hard, and get away fast. His loyal companions during the years of hardship, these warriors would later confer on David's 40-year reign its energetic and conquering spirit. Some of them grew to be men of renown: Joab, Ahiezar, Ishmaia, and the others (1 Chronicles 12: 1-16).

Two of David's associates during this time supplied gifts of another sort; these were Abiathar the priest and Gad the prophet. These two ministries---priest and prophet---would prove important to David, not only during his time as a fugitive, but also during his four decades on the throne of Israel (2 Samuel 8: 17; 2 Chronicles 29: 25).

Indeed, David's reliance on these two ministries, right from the beginning, sharply distinguished his career from that of Saul. After Samuel repudiated Saul, we never again find the king helped by a prophet. On the contrary, prophetic assistance was replaced by recourse to a witch (1 Samuel 27: 3-25)!

The situation was the same with respect to the priesthood, the duties of which Saul actually usurped (13: 8-12). Although the king at first made use of Ahijah's priestly ministry (14: 3), this recourse was apparently short-lived, especially after Saul slaughtered Ahijah's family at Nob.

Abiathar and Gad, then, represented a double advantage for David as he journey through the desert.

Abiathar, the lone survivor of Saul's massacre of the priests at Nob (1 Samuel 22: 20-22), provided two things for David in those desert years: First, the respect and prestige of validation by way of an important historical connection: Abiathar was the heir and direct descendent of ancient Eli, the priest of Shiloh and mentor of the boy Samuel so many years before.

Second, access to the oracular ephod entrusted to the priestly family: During this period David benefited from consulting this source of divine guidance (23:6-12; 30:7-8). On at least one occasion it saved his life.

Gad the prophet arrived at David's camp as though out of nowhere (22:5), though the name suggests he may have accompanied the warriors who joined David from the east side of the Jordan (1 Chronicles 12:8-12).

Gad's contribution to the venture was twofold. First, he took notes on what was happening (29:29). It is to Gad, surely, that we owe the original accounts of the fascinating episodes of David's life as a fugitive-including his final meeting with Jonathan (1 Samuel 23:14-18), his near-misses with Saul (23:14-28; 24:1-22; 26:5-25), his relationship to Achish (21:10-15; 27:2-12; 29:15-10), his conflict with Amalek (30:1-31), his deliverance of Keilah (23:1-5), the treachery of Doeg (21:7; 22:6-19), and the incident of Nabal and Abigail (25:2-42).

Second, Gad provided David with prophetic counsel. It was he, for instance, who warned David not to dally in the land of Moab (22:5). Since Gad continued to advise him long afterwards (cf. 2 Samuel 24:11-19; 1 Chronicles 21:9-19; 2 Chronicles 29:25), it is reasonable to surmise that David, during the desert period, relied on his gift of prophecy for guidance in the course of his travels.

In this respect, Gad may be likened to Silas, the prophetic companion of Paul on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40-41). It was apparently through the inspired mouth of Silas that Paul was given specific travel directions during that trip. Right after Silas joined Paul's missionary team, we are told of that team, "when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them" (16:6-7). Both Gad and Silas guided God's servants by warning them where *not* to go.

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