

May 20, 2012

Sunday of the Man Born Blind

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

First Samuel 24 narrates an encounter between Saul and David: the latter, when the king's jealousy and dangerous behavior drove him from the royal court, was obliged to wander, like an outlaw, in the desert regions in the south of Judah. Harassed and pursued by the army of the increasingly deranged king, David was constantly on the move, he and his small band of friends, hiding here and there as chance provided, often hungry and always exposed to danger. Saul had put a price on David's head, moreover, so there was the added peril of betrayal.

David's plight was dire indeed: "in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness," "being destitute, afflicted, tormented," while wandering "in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth" (2 Corinthians 11:27; Hebrews 11:37-38).

First Samuel 24 tells the story of David's concealment in such a cave, this one at Engedi, just west of the Dead Sea, where Saul had led a military detachment to apprehend the young fugitive.

The circumstances of this encounter draw attention to two features of the story, both of them typical of this whole period of David's desert wandering.

First, there is the quiet, subtle working of Divine Providence, whereby the Lord protects David from capture and delivers his enemy into his power. The Lord has all these things in His historical control, a truth perceived earlier in the scene where David *just happened to show up* at Saul's camp at the very moment Goliath was throwing out his challenge!

This theme of Divine Providence will be repeated in the next two chapters: the encounter with Nabal, and a second meeting with Saul.

Second, David shows mercy to Saul, whom he yet regards as Israel's rightful king. This trait of mercy will also be manifest (and put to the test) in the two chapters that follow.

Throughout this period of great hardship and relentless persecution David learned by experience that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). God

has "called" David to become the next and better king, and David must bide God's time and pleasure to reveal that call.

As Israel, at the time of Moses, endured a period of trial in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, so was David put to the test in the desert preparatory to assuming leadership of Israel. These several chapters of First Samuel (23-26) form an account of that period. During that time of wandering in the wilderness David, like Israel in the desert of old, was fed by sacred bread (1 Samuel 21) and was tempted to presumption (1 Samuel 25).

In this story God puts the life of Saul into David's hands. All David has to do, in order to seize the throne of Israel, is to reach out and take the life of the deranged king. David recognized each occasion as a temptation. He did not regard kingship over Israel as "a thing to be seized" (*harpagmos*---Philippians 2:6). Although it was David's to receive, it was not David's to take.

In this respect, David's temptation in this chapter reminds the reader of a temptation Satan put to Jesus in the desert: "Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these things I will give to you if You will fall down and worship me'" (Matthew 4:8-9).

This satanic "shortcut" to kingship was a temptation, inasmuch as it would have removed the necessity of the Cross. The Son of Man was tempted to *seize* what only the Ancient of Days could *give* (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 28:18). Jesus rejected the offer; he was content to serve God---"Him alone shalt thou serve" (Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:10).

This temptation to seize power, a temptation common to both Jesus and David, corresponds to the temptation experienced by Israel during the years of the desert wandering. Jesus himself made the connection by citing Deuteronomy 6:16). This verse refers to Israel's repeated disposition to seek temporary advantage by worshipping alien gods (Deuteronomy 12:30-31; Exodus 23:23-33).

Saul is bewildered by the mercy David shows him, because it conflicts with his own obsessive and murderous attitude. Saul is clinging desperately to what David refuses to seize. In short, David refuses to hasten the hour of his own ascent to the throne. In his patience, he possesses his soul.

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