



THE PASTOR'S DESK

January 24, 2010 - Old Testament Violence

Dear Parishioners,

Be careful what you ask for, you might get it. At the end of a recent bulletin article I invited anyone with a question to go ahead and ask. Well, someone took me up on this. The question was about all the violence that God ordered in the Old Testament. This past Monday, I had the opportunity to preach on this theme. The first reading that day was from the First Book of Samuel. In that passage, Saul, the king of Israel is ordered by God to destroy Amalek and all his people, men, women and children and all of his livestock. Well, Saul did as the Lord said . . . almost. He kept the livestock telling the Lord that he had done so in order to offer it to the Lord in sacrifice. The Lord was angry with Saul for not obeying Him completely.

What are we to make of this passage? How could a loving God order the massacre of an entire people? This question is vexing, indeed. It so vexing that early in the history of the Church a heresy came up call Marcionism, named for the priest, Marcion, who proposed it. He said that there were two gods presented in the Scripture. The first, the god of the Old Testament was the violent, vengeful God depicted in this passage from First Samuel. The second God is the God of peace and love, as revealed to us by Christ. The Church, of course, rejected Marcion's explanation, holding to the truth that there is only the one, true God revealing Himself throughout all the events in Sacred Scripture. But, how could it be the same God in both Testaments?

We have to begin with a couple of truths. First, God is all powerful, eternal, unchanging and "is love." Second, God comes to us as we are. We all agree on these two points. Let's begin with the second, God comes to us as we are. What if God had waited for us to understand Him as love before He revealed Himself to us? We would still be waiting.

What was fallen man like at the time of Saul? We can best describe the type of society at that time as tribal. There were relatively small groups of people who formed a language, ethnic or family group. They existed among many other such groups. Each group lived in constant fear of all the other groups. There was constant warfare over land and resources. When one group defeated another group, it was expected that the conquering group would wipe out the defeated group. The situation is nicely summed up in this passage from 1 Samuel 14:47-48 ...

When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines; wherever he turned he put them to the worse. And he did valiantly, and smote the Amalekites and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them.

The state of original sin is one in which we live as gang members. We have to associate ourselves with some strong man or group for our own protection. This is still,

today, perhaps, the predominant way people live. Most of the violence we see in our streets and in our world today is the result of one gang or tribe protecting itself from, or getting revenge on, some other gang or tribe. The teaching 'love your enemies' is incoherent in a tribal culture. God reveals His love in that He loved us even when we were sinners. Love of enemies makes us like God in His love. But, we have a long way to go from our state of Original Sin before we can even begin to fathom loving our enemies.

When God began to reveal Himself to mankind, He met us where we were. God began with simple obedience. He wanted obedience from Saul and didn't get it. Man had to first learn obedience to God before he had any hope of beginning to learn who God is. In King David, we have a step in the right direction. David seeks to obey God and has a strong conscience and repents for his sins when he disobeys. He also loves his sons even though they make themselves his enemies. David also puts up with the cursing and stone throwing by the Benjaminite as he passes through the Mount of Olives.

When we think "how could God have done this", we need to look to ourselves and see how deeply sin infects us. We chose to sin, we chose a tribal life, a life of struggle for the riches of the world and of fear of our neighbors. The real question should be "are we really that bad?" Without grace and God's revelation of Himself to us, how bad off would mankind be? We really don't have to look very far around us or into our past: Hutus and Tutsis killing each other, gang warfare in the streets of our cities and towns, death camps, "ethnic cleansing", etc. This is who we are without God. Thanks be to God that He met us as we are. If we can look around us today and look back on the past and think how far we have progressed and see that "God is love," we can only do this because God Himself has brought us here. Praise be the God who is love and who risks being accused of evil rather than leave us as miserable sinners.

What about Amalek and his people? Well, death is also a consequence of original sin. We can hope that the God of love had mercy on their souls for the role they played in Revelation.

**God bless,
Fr. LaHood**

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Mass for Shut-Ins

Want to be in the assembly when the SJN Choir tapes the Palm Sunday Mass for the Shut-Ins at the National Shrine? The cameras will roll at 7:00 pm on February 4 in the Crypt Chapel of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Please contact mlh827@comcast.net if you are planning to come.