

OLD TESTAMENT READING FOR JULY 12, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

OBSERVE:

The Ark of the Covenant is to the people of Israel what the Declaration of Independence, or the American flag, or some other evocative symbol might be to a citizen of the United States. It is also a highly spiritual symbol, as a cross or an altar might be to a Christian. The Ark combines the sense of identity that defines Israel as a nation along with a profound identification with Israel's God.

This is suggested by the description of the Ark, *which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark*. As the very Name of the Lord is holy and discloses God's nature, so the Ark signifies God's very presence among his people.

It should be obvious that David wants to have this highly significant symbol of Israel in his capital, where it will lend legitimacy to his reign as king of the United Kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

The Ark had been somewhat mobile since it was first built in answer to the Lord's specifications under Moses at least two centuries earlier. It had been carried throughout the wilderness; it had been instrumental in stopping the waters of the Jordan River so Joshua could lead the Israelites into the Land of Promise; it had been used, and misused, as a battle totem; it had been captured by the Philistines, and promptly returned when it brought on plagues; it had resided in Bethel, Shiloh, Beth Shemesh, and Kiriath Jearim, where it had dwelt for twenty years.

The Ark tended to bring blessing to those who honored it, and disaster to those who treated it casually or irreverently.

So now David wishes to bring it to his new capital in Jerusalem with great fanfare. However, his methods, though certainly well-intentioned, are incompatible with the Lord's original instructions to Moses. The ark is set on a cart and escorted by the sons of Abinadab — this may be the first error. Some suggest they are not Levites, and are not sanctioned to have charge of the ark. Second, they place the ark on a cart, rather than having it carried by Levites as the Law of Moses prescribed.

The verses that are deleted in our lectionary reading describe the fateful events that ensue. When the oxen pulling the cart stumble, the ark shifts and Uzzah, one of Abinadab's sons, reacts naturally — he reaches out his hand to steady the ark, and almost literally explodes! David's reaction is at first angry — and then fearful. This ark isn't to be trifled with!

So, David sends the ark on a detour to the household of Obed-Edom the Gittite. It should be noted that Obed-Edom likely was not an Israelite; and yet the Lord blessed him for the three months the ark stayed among his family.

When David sees that Obed-Edom has been blessed because he has treated the ark with reverence, in contrast to the household of Abinadab, David resolves to try again.

This time he is anxious to do everything right: it is carried rather than carted — we presume by Levites this time! A sacrifice is made to the Lord six steps into the sojourn, and then at the end of the journey. And David himself *Wearing a linen ephod . . . was dancing before the Lord with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets*.

Presumably, this ecstatic celebration of the Lord's presence is met with approval by the Lord, as the ark takes its place of honor inside the tent that David has had pitched for it — again, presumably according to the prescriptions in the Law of Moses this time!

Even the whole crowd of Israelites, we are told, rejoice with David: and *he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women.* Obviously a festive day of worship and praise and feasting and celebration!

However, there is at least one person not impressed in the least — David's wife Michal, the princess daughter of King Saul. In her mind, as she watched David, stripped to the waist, *leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart.* In her haughty, royal mind, David has demeaned himself this day, and sullied the dignity of the crown.

APPLY:

How are we to appropriately worship the Lord with honor and reverence? This is a question that seems to have serious consequences.

Without entering into the lists of the “worship wars,” and taking sides with the “traditionalists” or the “contemporary praise and worship” group, I think it can be safely said that worship should always keep the holiness of God before the people.

We may play organs or guitars or sing acapella, but the primary purpose is not spectacle or convenience or any human centered, individualistic goal. The primary purpose of worship is for the people of God to acknowledge and honor God.

Having said that, the notions of decorum and “dignity” that some might project onto worship are blown up by the example of David, *dancing before the Lord with all his might, accompanied with shouts and the sound of trumpets.*

While there is certainly a time for quiet, reflective “reverence,” reverence may also be expressed with dancing, shouting and loud music!

What has no place in worship is the kind of self-consciousness exhibited by Michal, that makes of worship a social enterprise rather than a God-centered enterprise. David's unselfconsciousness suggests that his heart is totally focused on God!

RESPOND:

I'm lucky. I cherish all manifestations of worship. I love the serenity of Benedictine monks singing Gregorian chants; the excitement of Pentecostal worship; the profound depth of a Greek Orthodox liturgy; and the joy of a praise band. So long as God is truly worshipped and glorified, I am at home in any Christian worship service.

May my worship of you be according to your design, not a projection of my own narcissistic need-fulfillment; and may I forget myself completely as I focus only on you! Amen!

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