

Father Albert Shamon

A Word for Sunday



The providence of God

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 14:13-21; (R1) Isaiah 55:1-3; (R2) Romans 8:35, 37-39.

The providence of God is the theme of Sunday's liturgy. Matthew divided his Gospel into five booklets or discourses of the Lord, imitating the five books of Moses in order to teach that Jesus is the new Moses. He introduced each discourse with narratives of the deeds of Jesus to make it clear that Jesus was a doer, not just a talker like the Scribes and Pharisees.

During the month of August, the Gospels will be from the narratives (chapters 14-17) preceding the fourth discourse (chapter 18). In the middle of chapter 13, we saw the crowds turning away from Jesus and He, on His part, turning to His disciples.

"When Jesus heard of the death of John, he withdrew to a deserted place by himself." One can only sense here the rejection He felt. He withdrew perhaps to grieve over John and over the fact that, like John, He, too, would be rejected and put to death.

Still the crowds flocked to Him. Although Matthew does not say so, Jesus must have preached to them. When it was late, Jesus told His disciples to feed the crowd. "We have but five loaves and a couple of fish," they retorted, "hardly enough for ourselves."

But Jesus always did much with little. So he took the food at hand and looked up to heaven, for this bread would also be bread from heaven, reminiscent of the manna and foreshadowing the Eucharistic bread. Then He blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the apostles to distribute, to assure us that He will always provide pastors and shepherds with what they need to satisfy hungry hearts.

This incident is more a sign than a miracle. It is a sign of divine providence. In this age of self-reliance, providence is not a commonly used word. Yet it is an expression of our creaturehood. If we forget our dependence on God, our lives will be shattered.

The word "providence" contains the smaller word "provide." Providence means God will provide. And he will not only provide, but provide abundantly — 12 baskets were left over after the miracle of the loaves.

Yet people in the world die every day of starvation, from lack of the necessities of life. Why doesn't God provide for their needs?

Providence is a perplexing idea, made

more so by the common supposition that it implies divine interference in the course of human events. The Book of Job raised the question: "If a man is good, doesn't he have the right to expect God will take care of him?"

The answer of course depends on what is meant by "taking care." It certainly doesn't mean that God will stand between a good man and all calamity, or that the life of the good person will always be a ball, the weather always balmy and events always happy.

However, it can mean that in calamity, God will be there to support the good person and see him or her through, as He did when Jesus suffered in Gethsemane. It does mean that "God makes all things work together for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). It means He's got the whole wide world in His hands and "shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."

A mother can understand something of the complexity of providence when she divides a cupcake between two hungry children. The first few times she divides the cupcake she may make a bad mistake. Within minutes she may be assailed by rage and accusations: "You always give him or her the bigger piece!"

After a while, a mother learns from experience. The next time she has to divide a cupcake, she says, "OK kids, we're going to divide this cupcake in two. Now one of you is going to cut it and the other gets first choice. Who wants to cut and who wants to choose?"

Even that won't solve the problem. Although the cupcake may be severed exactly in half, if the boy gobbles his down while his sister nibbles on hers, she may yet taunt him: "Ha, outfoxed you again; I got the bigger and better piece!"

So with divine providence. God deals fairly with us all, but we have our weaknesses and — God help poor God — He pipes a tune and we won't dance. He sings a dirge and we won't weep. He is dammed if He does and damned if He doesn't.

At Medjugorje Our Lady said, "If you want to be very happy, live a simple, humble life, pray a great deal and do not delve into your problems. Let God resolve them."

We complicate life. Simplicity means putting ourselves in the hands of God, budgeting life on divine providence.

He knows, He loves, He cares,
Nothing this truth can dim,
He gives His every best to those
Who leave the choice with Him.

Cindy Bassett

The Bible Corner



The Garden of Eden

In the very beginning, the entire world belonged to Adam and Eve, for God had given all of creation to them. Everything was theirs to enjoy, except for one tree that grew in the center of the Garden of Eden.

"You must never eat of the fruit of this tree," God commanded. "If you do, you shall no longer live forever, but be doomed to die."

Unfortunately, not all of God's creatures were good. The serpent was cunning in his evilness. He was jealous of Adam and Eve and did not want anyone to rule over him.

One day, the serpent found a way to change things. As Eve sat all alone he slithered toward her. "Hungry, Eve?" he asked, his yellow eyes gleaming with deceit.

"Oh, a little, I suppose," she replied.

"But Adam has gone to gather food?"

"I know a place where the sweetest fruit in all of the world is to be found," the serpent hissed. "Your husband will love it."

"Where can I find it?" Eve asked eagerly.

"You have but to follow me," the serpent beckoned gently.

It was nearly dark at the center of the garden. The trees had grown so thickly there that the sun could not filter through the leaves and the air felt chilly. "Wait!" Eve cried, suddenly becoming afraid. "I can't hear the music anymore."

"What music, my dear?" the serpent asked.

"The music of God," Eve replied. "It's been playing since the very first day."

"I do hear something, but it is quite faint," he said, reassuring her. "I'm certain the music will be louder when we get there."

"I suppose you are right," Eve said, still not convinced. "How much farther is this place?"

"Here we are, just as I promised," the serpent announced a few minutes later.

"But this is the tree God warned us about!" Eve cried. "We shall die if we eat any of the fruit!"

"That's a lie!" The serpent challenged. "God knows that if you eat of it, you shall become like Him!"

"But we are already like God!" Eve protested. "He has put His own music within our souls!"

"Not quite, my dear woman," he remarked. "You are neither clever nor wise."

For the first time in her life, Eve doubted God. Maybe he had lied to her and Adam. This thought made her cold and weak all over. She didn't notice that in this place there was no music at all.

"Eat a little, Eve," the serpent coaxed.

"You'll feel better!"

As soon as she had tasted the fruit, Eve turned to the serpent and said, "You have lied!" The fruit is not sweet at all, but bitter!

The serpent was nowhere to be seen. Eve felt so weak now that she fell back into a deep sleep. She awakened when Adam shook her gently.

"Oh Adam!" she cried. "I'm so afraid! I've had horrible dreams. The animals were fighting, and people were trying to hurt each other. The whole world was slowly dying. And suddenly, a lamb, surrounded by angels with flaming swords, came into the world. The serpent turned into a red dragon and there was a great battle with the lamb!"

"Why did you eat the fruit?" Adam asked.

"It was the serpent's fault," she explained. "I did it for you. Adam, do you love me?"

"Of course I do!"

"Then taste the fruit, too," Eve pleaded. "See if you have visions, too!"

Adam did not sleep after he ate the fruit. Instead, his entire being was filled with such dread that he wept uncontrollably. "Eve," he sobbed, "we have betrayed our best friend. We must go and hide ourselves!"

Soon the Lord came to them both, for one can never hide from God. The serpent had succeeded in changing the world for at least awhile, and God condemned him for his evilness. For the rest of his miserable life, the serpent would crawl on his belly eating the dust.

Adam and Eve also were punished; God banished them from the Garden of Eden. "Now the struggle begins," the Lord told them sadly. "For the rest of your lives, you will have to work hard just to stay alive. And someday, you will both die and return to the earth like the dust from which you were made."

Just before they left Eden, Eve asked God, "What about Your beautiful music? Shall we ever hear it again?"

"My music, like my love, will go on forever," the Lord replied. "Only now you must learn to turn from the world and listen very hard, deep within yourselves to hear it. If you seek Me, you will find Me."

God placed angels with flaming swords at the entrance to the Garden of Eden. And then — because He knew how much His beloved creatures would suffer because of this first sin — He grieved for many days. Scripture reference: Genesis chapter 3.

Merton

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Monsignor Shannon observes, likening its duality to that of the Gospels, which function both as historical accounts and as reflections enlightened by Easter faith.

Similarly, he says, public perceptions of Merton are frequently narrow, focusing on one aspect while ignoring others. "Everyone has a different Merton," he remarks, noting that those who are interested in spirituality may consider only his mysticism, while others may look solely at his social activism or literary contributions.

"There are some people who, unfortunately, have put Merton on a pedestal and would even

be interested in establishing a cult of Thomas Merton. People have even asked me about the possibility of Merton being canonized," Monsignor Shannon says, explaining that the idea is laughable and would be particularly so to Merton himself. "Merton was a human being, who refused to pretend to be what he was not."

To clarify such misconceptions, promote awareness of Merton beyond the sphere of religion and encourage Merton scholarship, Monsignor Shannon and other academics have for some time felt a need to form some international body.

Meeting in two Merton conferences in 1978, some 20-plus scholars considered the possibility of establishing the organization immediately, but concluded that much work — the publication of Merton's letters, a comprehen-

sive bibliography and definitive biographies — should be done before the society was born. Since those meetings, this work has been accomplished, and the 14 academics who met this past May felt the time was right.

Beyond making initial plans for "Celebrate Merton '88" — a series of events in North America and Europe, beginning on January 31 (Merton's birthday) and concluding on December 10 (the anniversary of his death) — the scholars approved bylaws and elected officers. In addition to Monsignor Shannon, the leaders of the society are: vice president, Dr. Robert E. Daggy, curator of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville; corresponding secretary, Christine Bochen, Nazareth College, Rochester; and recording secretary/treasurer, Bonnie Thur-

ston, Bethany, West Virginia.

The first actual meeting is planned for May of 1989, and organizers are currently occupying themselves with such chores as setting up a non-profit corporation, drawing up plans for 1988 events and publicizing the society's existence.

"Merton has a much wider appeal than simply to Roman Catholics," Monsignor Shannon concludes. "The scholarly work will go on whether there is a society or not, but I think one of the things the society will do is to make Merton better known."

For information on membership or "Celebrate Merton '88" activities, contact Monsignor William H. Shannon, 4095 East Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14618.

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