

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

A Merciful God Fourth Week in Ordinary Time Wednesday, February 5, 2014
8:15 AM **2 Sm 24:2, 9-17;** Mk 6:1-6 St. Agatha, virgin, martyr (Understanding the alien Israelite culture)

In this reading from the Book of Samuel we have a testimony to the alien nature of ancient **Israelite culture, alien to us.**

In the whole story that is found in the Bible, David suggests a census and Joab actually argues with him. He says, “How could you do such a thing? That is so offensive to God.” No one knows why that would be offensive. There are scholars who speculate that taking a census violated the independence of the tribes, but no one really knows. So here is a story of **David taking a census**, then the results of the census—completely unbelievable. **There could not have been so many people in that land at that time.** That land did not support so many people. And to say that this is the number of people who were actually eligible for military service is beyond preposterous, so it goes.

Anyway that is just a backdrop of this story about a **pestilence**. Probably there was a pestilence because that happens. And apparently this pestilence spread through the northern part and then when it got to Jerusalem it stopped. Well, that’s very possible. Jerusalem is very high up, and it could have been exempt for that reason alone in the spread of something that was more agricultural, for example. So we really don’t know, but it is a possible thing that there was a pestilence. The thing is, and this is what is so alien to our thinking, in those times **when something bad happened they went to look for the reason. In this case the reason was David had ordered a census—no wonder!**

And then the story about the **choice**, whether it is to be this or this or this, that tends to be, you might say, **the creative work of the author.** You might say it’s the framework of many stories where there are choices: you want this, or you want this, or you want this? And each

one of them has **different consequences, but they are all bad.** It's just which is the worst. In this case it was the best consequence according to David's mind, but that is part of the story rather than, as far as I can tell, the actual facts. So often we don't know facts. Even here we don't actually have any facts; it's just that it is plausible there was a pestilence. What is not plausible is there are so many people living at that time.

Anyway we get to the end of this, and what is the point of the story? The point of the story is that **"The angel of the Lord was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite."** Well, lo and behold, guess what? **That's the place where the Temple was put.** So this explains why the Temple was where it was. Again, to our point of view that's not really important. To the ancient point of view it was very important. If you had a temple, you had to know why it was where it was. It had to be a good reason. Well, here is one. The angel of the Lord stood there, as the Lord stayed the pestilence.

So what are Christians supposed to get out of this? That is a very good question. I would suggest that what we focus on is that even in the Old Testament, even though they had very strange ideas about all kinds of things, **one thing they knew: God was a forgiving God.** In that way the one thing that carries over is God, God's goodness, God's willingness to forgive, and the awareness in the minds of the people that that is the way God is. We know that the incarnation of Jesus Christ as Son of David is a strange thing. You might say, it's something that can't be explained: **why did God become an Israelite, a Jew? Maybe because the Jews always kept this alive: that God is a merciful God.**