

HARMONY A RARITY, EVEN IN THE BIBLE

People who can agree with each other are more the exception than the rule. Men and women have a rather nasty way of provoking each other and proofing disagreeable. Harmony among folks is a rarity, even in the Bible.

If you insist on reading the Bible through rose colored glasses, you are missing some realistic insights. The characters there are pictured in quite realistic terms. And the basic character of men and women is just as honestly portrayed.

Think of Cain and Abel, two brothers who couldn't get their act together when they worshiped; Abraham and Lot, an uncle-and-nephew combination that quarreled over pasture lands; Jacob and his father-in-law Laban, who disagreed on the terms of their business partnership.

Add to that King David and his son Absalom, both vying for the same throne; Amos and Amaziah, a prophet and priest at loggerheads in the king's temple; Elijah and Ahab, a classic struggle between prophet and king. The list could go on and on.

Most of the authors of the Jewish scriptures had enough candor to recognize that harmony is in short supply. Psalm 133 offers a quaint commentary on the rarity of such unit. This five-line poem is a prize insight into the basic goodness of togetherness.

Try to picture several thousand pilgrims milling around in the courts of the temple. Some had traveled for days just to worship together at one of the annual feasts. "See how pleasant this is," sings the psalmist, "when compatriots can live together in unity!"

After hours plodding up to Jerusalem, the sun has chapped their faces. Fine dust has caked in the corners of their eyes and matted with sweat in their hair. The quickest, most long-lasting relief was an olive-oil facial. The height of luxury was to have enough of that expensive perfumed oil to pour over your head and let it run down your beard.

"That," suggests the traveler in verse 2 of Psalm 133, "is precisely how refreshing it is when people are united."

Speaking of beards, every Israelite man wanted to sport a long, flowing beard. But if you were a farmer or herdsman or shop-keeper it wasn't too practical. So, many of the men who found themselves in the temple courts had to be content with comparatively short, rough beards.

But the leader of their worship—namely, the high priest descended from Aaron—was required by tradition to keep his beard long and full. As a rule of thumb, his beard had to drape over the collar of his vestments. His beard was magnificent!

"That too," insists the psalmist, "is how magnificent it is when brothers live harmoniously."

For the duration of the festival the pilgrims there on Mount Zion were worshipping congenially. But in the summertime the temple hill could be a pretty hot rock. The poet must have thought of the snow-capped peaks of Mount Hermon in the north country.

If you could get some snow from the Sierra Nevada to cool things down in the Mojave Desert, what a refreshing experience that would be.

Similarly, suggests the psalmist in verse 3, when people worship congenially it is almost as refreshing as "the dew of Hermon flowing down upon the mountains of Zion."

Put it all together and what you have is a real blessing, the Lord's gift of limitless life. And the best taste you can get of that gift is to experience people living together in unity.

No doubt the insights of Psalm 133 are so engaging simply because the psalmist recognizes what we all know: Real harmony among people is a rarity. When you're lucky enough to enjoy it, you need to celebrate such unity.