

Thought for the Day 6th April - John Reed

Read Psalm 20

Sybaris was an important city in “Magna Graecia” (Latin for “Great Greece”), which was ironically a region in Southern Italy. It was so-named by the Romans because it was extensively settled by Greeks, who arrived in the area from the 8th Century BC and brought with them their Greek (or “Hellenic”) civilization and culture.

Sybaris was founded in 720 BC, and quickly amassed great wealth due to its fertile land and busy port. The inhabitants of Sybaris gained a reputation for feasting, self-indulgence and hedonism; to the extent that they gave us the English word “sybaritic”, which describes someone fond of sensuous luxury and pleasure.

Unfortunately for them, the Sybarites were defeated by the Krotonites (don’t they sound like some form of alien from *Star Trek*?) in 510 BC. Some ancient writers attributed their downfall to their arrogance, corruption, and addiction to luxury and self-indulgence. One story, told by the Greek writer Athanaeus, speaks of the role their dancing horses played in their defeat.

Apparently, Sybaris had a contingent of cavalry which was so proficient and so powerful that everyone in the entire town knew they were secure. No expense was spared in making sure that the cavalry was always at a high state of readiness. So over-confident were the cavalry that they amused themselves by training their horses to dance to flute music. However, when the Krotonite army came to attack, they produced flute players of their own – and when they began to play, the horses of the Sybarites danced right over to the Krotonites, carrying their hapless riders with them!

King David – himself a great warrior-king – knew that one can’t ultimately trust the cavalry to keep you safe. He wrote (Psalm 20:7-8):

*Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.
They are brought to their knees and fall,
but we rise up and stand firm.*

Maybe we don’t trust in horses the same way today; but we do often trust in their modern equivalents: our guns, planes, rockets and other forms of defense. It could be argued that the modern Western culture is fairly “sybaritic” in other ways too. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from the misplaced confidence, and the fate, of ancient Sybaris.

There is a better place to look for security and peace. David spoke of trusting in the name of the Lord, and Paul wrote (Philippians 4:7):

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.