

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Oct 31st 2013

Paul's letter to the Romans includes powerful words of encouragement, seemingly spoken to people in the midst of a struggle that may not be going so well. When you are being "slain all the day" and "looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered", neither the present nor the immediate future looks very promising. The love of our God may indeed seem far from us as we look for signs of his favor in the midst of that struggle. But maybe that is because we are looking for the wrong signs.

And sometimes we also want those signs to be particularly visible to others who can't see them. The Psalm for today contains a cry for salvation – a cry for God to stand with us and help us in the midst of a struggle. It includes a plea: "And let them know that this is your hand; that you, O LORD, have done this." When we need rescuing from our enemies, we would like them to know that God is standing with us. And the more dramatic, the better. This is human nature. But again, this common thread of human experience may also reveal misplaced intentions – are we looking for the wrong signs again?

Is vindication in the eyes of others, especially our enemies, really that important? This is a difficult question that may not be easily dismissed. We may want that vindication to protect God's reputation, including His justice. Israel's delivery from Egypt came with powerful signs of vindication, including clear and convincing power from Heaven producing deliverance and freedom, as well as punishing hardships on their enemies. So why not expect the same at other times? And how do we keep from disappointment when our expectations go unfulfilled? Or is disappointment an indication that we are focusing on the wrong signs?

To be sure, signs of vindication accompanied our Lord, too. In today's gospel, the Pharisees were looking at the signs of the times, and they told Jesus to flee. In one sense, they were right. But it seems they could not see the more important signs demonstrating the identity of our Lord through works of mercy in their midst. Jesus performed signs of vindication openly – casting out demons and healing the sick. But those signs are of a different character than we might expect – they uplifted and infused life into people, rather than crushing those who resisted or did not fall into agreement. That vindication came through demonstrating love in action. And that love in action included Jesus' own death, rather than killing those who opposed him. Maybe that gives us clues as to the signs we should be looking for.

But we know that Jesus obtained another kind of vindication – resurrection. The enemy he crushed and pummeled was death, and he opened a path for all of us to participate in a community of divine love. It is that community that Paul speaks of, which permeates life so thoroughly that nothing can overcome it.

The gospel reading ends with Jesus using a metaphor of a hen seeking to gather an unwilling brood. Chicks instinctively know to retreat to the warmth and safety of their mother. I have never observed an unwilling chick, and if one did exist, it would not last long -- which makes this metaphor all the more powerful. Jesus is lamenting the stubborn refusal to see signs so obvious they could not be missed.

May God open our eyes to look for the important signs of his love for us, even in the midst of struggle. And may our prayers for vindication lead us to ways of opening pathways for others to discover that love, as our Lord did for each of us.

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