

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Years ago I gave some lectures in Australia, and a friend there invited me to spend a free day at the Melbourne Cricket Grounds to watch a game of Australian Rules Football with him and his brother, a former umpire, who could explain the game to me. This sounded like great fun, and it was. The field is enormous. The number of players is countless, and the rules are indecipherable. Whoever invented this game studied six professional sports, misunderstood them all, and rolled them into one. But it was contagious, and I understood why people all over the country love what they call the footy. At the end of the game, I witnessed something I never see at home. The opposing teams went to the middle of field and formed two lines. Each player shook the hand of every opposing player before going back to the clubhouse. It looked gentlemanly. I said to my friend, "They shake hands?" He said, "Well, of course." I said, "We never do that." The players demonstrated more openly a respect that is understood in the world of sports: You want to beat the other team, but you don't wish them any harm. If an opposing player is injured, you don't gloat; you feel compassion.

In other areas of life we also respect our rivals. A political race can get verbally mean, but one candidate does not plot physical harm on the other. Students vie for attention, but they don't mean to hurt each other. A competitive coworker may want an edge over you, but not injury. A divorce is emotionally painful. Sadly, some of them do result from abuse. Physical harm is in a category by itself - whether it results from reckless driving, gun violence, or warfare. Some people do intend to hurt and to kill. Any of us could be an innocent victim in someone else's disregard for human life - and for God.

Today's responsorial, Psalm 54, was written by someone under that threat. One tradition holds that a young David first sang it when he fled from King Saul. It goes, "the proud have risen against me, and the ruthless seek my life. They have no regard for God." This is more serious than competition at work, spite between siblings, or deception in sports. It is disregard for another's wellbeing. It is evil.

This psalm helps us handle even lesser situations of rivalry. The person never despairs, but continues with these words: "I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul." Or, as we sang in the refrain, "The Lord upholds my life." We sing this today because the first reading depicts a just person beset by the wicked, which foreshadows the end of Jesus' life. In the gospel he predicts his betrayal to enemies who will kill him. However, Jesus knows more. "Three days after his death," he says, "the Son of Man will rise." Now it's easier to see why the refrain of today's psalm is about upholding life. It doesn't simply mean that God will hold us up as respectable people, but that no matter the threat, God can and will sustain the just, raise up the just from death to eternal life.

Sometimes the threats that surround us, whether from strangers, colleagues or people we once loved, are indecipherable, like the rules of a foreign sports match. We don't always know why someone would wish us harm. We don't always have a way to stop it when they do. But beyond the power of those who seek our life is the power of God who sustains our life. Even when others do not value who we are, God upholds our meaning, our purpose, our future, our hope.