

Signs

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: They are all around us and though we take them for granted and rarely think about them, we would be in a world of hurt without signs. Signs warn us of danger, they control traffic making our travels safe, they guide us to our destinations, and they tell us when we've arrived. No one would disagree that the signs in our lives are both helpful and necessary.

But then signs are only helpful if you know how to read them, as one of our young members, Trent Aldrich, discovered not long ago. He's stationed in Germany serving in the Air Force. In some of his free time he decided to take a road trip with a couple of his friends to see and experience a bit of the host country. It proved to be more challenging than he imagined because once you're off the American military base, all the signs are in German. He found that it greatly complicated the matter of proper navigation.

Of course, not all signs are written in words. Some are just a symbol, a shape, or perhaps a certain color. A hunter looks for signs on the ground of the animal he's tracking. And sometimes the Lord himself communicates messages to his people by unwritten signs. Think of Moses and his staff that became a serpent; or Gideon and his alternately wet or dry fleece; or the angel telling the shepherds, "This shall be a sign to you: you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Caution is in order when it comes to interpreting such signs. You may be familiar with a 2002 motion picture entitled *Signs*. In it actor Mel Gibson plays an Episcopal priest who's lost his faith in God because his wife died in a tragic accident. She was out on an evening run along the side of the road and was hit by a car. Anyway, without spoiling the whole plot, what happens are a series of seemingly unrelated occurrences, some weird, some unfortunate, some rather scary. But in one climactic moment, all of these scattered things suddenly coalesce into a complete and coherent message. The Gibson character understands them as signs that are all pointing in the same direction and he acts upon them. The result is a good and happy outcome. He realizes that yes, there is indeed a benevolent higher power who is controlling all events, and thus he regains his faith in God.

It makes for an entertaining story; but for some really bad theology. The Lord doesn't need to use combinations of coincidences as signs to prove that he exists. One has only to look at the creation for that: his fingerprints are all over it. But just knowing that God exists doesn't tell us who he is. For that we need the revelation that comes only through Jesus Christ.

Nor should we go around pursuing to know the Lord or his will for us by looking for signs. This is what leads to nonsense like people finding images of the Virgin Mary in a cinnamon roll or a water stain beneath a highway overpass. Others seek signs from God to tell them what school to attend, what job to take, what person to marry, and so on. They think there's only one possible answer to such questions, and if they don't read the signs correctly and follow the Lord's unique plan for them, their whole lives will be ruined. The truth is that the Lord gives us the Christian freedom to make our own informed choices about such things. He's in control, yes; but he's not a control freak.

Still, the Lord does give us signs. And in today's Gospel, Jesus warns us against misreading them. Backing up just a bit, shortly before our text, Jesus had taken his hearers to task by saying to them, "You can read the signs in the sky that tell you what the weather is going to be tomorrow; but you can't read the signs of the times." He was telling the Jews of his day that they weren't getting it. In his ministry with his miracles and his teaching they were being shown sign after sign that told them the Messiah had come and that he was the one. He was doing all the things the prophets foretold the Messiah would do. And yet they were rejecting him. The signs were there. Everything was pointing to him. But they weren't reading the signs right.

And so we come to today's text. Some of those present tell Jesus about a recent tragic incident. A group of Galileans were worshipping in the Temple. For reasons unknown, on Pilate's orders they were cut down by Roman soldiers at the same moment they were offering their sacrifices. The result was that their own blood spilled atop and mixed with the blood of their sacrificial lambs. We don't have the details. A possible scenario is that these Galileans were suspected of being zealots: an illegal organization of anti-Roman Jews who used terrorist tactics against the occupiers of their homeland. Pilate might have issued a warrant for their arrest. The soldiers sent to capture them just happened to catch up with them when they were in the Temple. Maybe they resisted arrest. Maybe they were furious because their sacred worship was being interrupted. Maybe they really were zealots and drew weapons to avoid capture. Who knows? We do know that tensions were always high between the Romans and their Jewish subjects. Whatever happened we can assume that it was a volatile situation that got out hand. In the end, the Galileans were dead; and dead in a most sacrilegious way that would have deeply offended the religious sensibilities of the Jews. Thinking like they did, it might appear to be a sign that the Lord was especially angry with these Galileans, that they were such notorious sinners that he wasn't accepting a sacrifice from them. That's why they died before their sins could be declared forgiven – the dirty, rotten scoundrels.

In response Jesus says, "Is that what you think, that these Galileans were worse sinners than the rest because they suffered this way? No. You're reading the sign wrong. It's not about them; it's about you. Unless *you* repent, you will likewise perish."

Jesus goes on to remind his hearers of another tragic incident they were familiar with, this one not caused directly by human action. The tower of Siloam in the lower part of the city of Jerusalem had collapsed suddenly, claiming 18 victims. It was just one of those random misfortunes that happen, kind of like being hit by lightning. But again, the human tendency is to assume that in some way the victims had it coming. God deals with people as they deserve, right? That's what Job's friends kept telling him. All this misfortune that happened to you, it was because of some secret sin in your life. The Lord is punishing you for it. The signs are clear.

To which Jesus says, "No. If that's what you're thinking, if that's the way you're reading the sign, you're wrong. The message you are to take away from incidents like this is that YOU need to repent." What Jesus is saying is this: those Galileans and the people killed by the collapse of the tower have this in common: on the morning they woke up for the last time, they didn't know it would be their last time. Even immediately before they died, they had no idea that their last moment living on this earth was only seconds away. Death came to them swiftly and unexpectedly. No one but God knows whether they were ready for it in a spiritual sense; and God will sort that out. You can't make any judgments or draw any inferences about them from the way they died. But it is a sign to you. It forces you to ask the question, Am I ready? Am I repentant on account of my sin?

But it's exactly there that we don't want to go. We don't want to admit our own sin. It's so much easier to see the sin in others than it is to see the sin in ourselves. Indeed, the reason we go in direction of thinking "they probably had it coming" when tragedy strikes is that we think "it didn't happen to me because *I don't deserve it*". Jesus' point is, oh yes you do. And one day it will happen. And when it does, will you be ready for it?

Jesus drives home his point with a parable about an unproductive fig tree. For three years the owner of the vineyard in which the tree stands has been looking for fruit on it; but he's always disappointed. Jesus is, no doubt, referring to the three years of his own ministry. And what the Lord has been looking for is the fruit of repentance from the people living in the city of Jerusalem. It's Jesus himself who pleads for more time. Give it another year. Let me do what I can to aerate the roots and fertilize it. If after that it doesn't produce, well, okay; chop it down. Jesus can only mean by this his own passion, death, and resurrection. If that doesn't bring the people of Jerusalem to repentance, knowing that they killed their Messiah and the Lord of glory, nothing will.

As it happens, they weren't given just one more year, but nearly forty. And some did repent and believe the good news. But most did not. And in the year A.D. 70, the tree was cut down when the Roman general Titus razed the city of Jerusalem to the ground. Death came to the inhabitants both young and old. And because they were unrepentant, they were unprepared. Thus they perished not just in time, but for eternity.

And that too is a sign for us. The Christian life is to be above all else a life of continuous repentance. Every day we sin much. And every day – even multiple times a day – we need to repent and acknowledge our need for the forgiveness earned for us by Jesus' suffering and death. We need to confess with St. Paul that in me, that is in my sinful flesh, there dwells no good thing. And to the extent that it is up to me and my own efforts, there never will be any good thing within me. The whole journey of the Christian life depends on the mercy and forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus.

This is emphasized in today's Epistle lesson in which Paul gives us the example of the notoriously unfaithful Israelites whom the Lord led out of Egypt. They all began the journey to the Promised Land; but many did not make it. The Lord's daily provision was there for all of them. They were all baptized, as it were, in the Red Sea, just as we are baptized into Christ. They all ate the same spiritual food: the daily manna of God's Word. They all drank the same spiritual drink, just as we drink the blood of Christ in Holy Communion. And yet many of them fell in the desert. Why? Because some fell into idolatry, trusting in something other than the Lord. Some fell into sexual sins. Some became complacent with their sin and took the forgiveness of God for granted. They thought that God's forgiveness was a license for them to go on sinning. "It's okay, I'm forgiven." They lost the fear of the Lord. They lost the sense of how much God hates sin and justly threatens to punish those who commit them. Others got fed up with their daily rations and grumbled about it, just as we grow weary of the means of grace God has appointed, his Word and Sacraments. Same old readings, same old hymns, same old liturgy, same old wafer and sip of wine ... why can't we do something else for a change? Spice things up a little?

It's easy to point a finger at those pathetic Israelites and wonder how they could be so spiritually blind and stupid. But Paul says these things were written down for our instruction. They are signs for us. Truthfully, those people are us. We're exactly the same as them. If anyone thinks he stands let him take heed, lest he fall. Indeed, if any one of us thinks he stands on his own, he's already fallen.

We aren't faithful. But God is. And he has prepared a way for us to escape when tempted. It's not that we don't fall. To be sure, if you are tempted to sin, if you think you'd like to do something wrong, you've already sinned. The desire to sin is itself sinful. And if you resist and don't do the sin you desire, you've fallen off the other side of the horse, patting yourself on the back for being such a good person that you were able to overcome the temptation. Thus you've fallen into the sin of self righteousness. And you see no need to repent.

Yes, that's how messed up we are. The signs are all there. And they all point in the same direction: to Jesus. He alone is our hope, our Savior, and our life in time and eternity. May God give us the grace always to read the signs correctly that we live the life of continuous repentance and trust in Jesus and so make it to the Promised Land. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!