

22 JAN 20 - Saint Vincent Deacon and Martyr.

1 Sam 17:32-33, 37, 40-51; Mark 3:1-6

We see in both readings today the forces of the world, the naysayers and unbelievers, arrayed against God and his people. In the familiar story of David and Goliath, the Philistines represent the world's way of going about things: strength through force of arms, adherence to the kinds of gods that suit themselves, doubt in any sort of intervention from the Transcendent God. There are people exactly like them around today. People who trust that weapons, material possessions, advertising campaigns, majority opinion, will assure them of security and dominance. In the Gospel, the Pharisees only see the here and now, the things that they can verify empirically, measure, test out. Frankly, they're not too happy about God doing anything, upsetting their apple-carts. They are like certain sections of the Church, who act as if the Holy Spirit is somehow not capable of acting today. They prefer to rely on systems, bureaucracies, discussions with focus groups, jumping on the bandwagon of the secular hoping to Christianise it somehow.

David, like Christ, has faith, however, in what cannot be seen, in what is not apparent to the eyes of unbelief. With confidence, though, David trusts that God will come to the rescue, that God will save life. He bats away the objection of Saul, that he's too young and inexperienced, and frankly too weak physically, to conquer the giant. David sees that, despite the obvious, the Lord *will* deliver. Just like he previously delivered him from the paws of lions and bears, so David trusts that the Lord is going to deliver the People from this brutish beast of a man, Goliath, and from the beastly Philistines, at the hand of a shepherd boy.

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Comparing this two readings, it's amazing how strongly the theme of **hands** comes up. In the Gospel it's all about Jesus healing a withered hand. A withered hand represents powerlessness, the inability to work or fight, quite serious deficiencies even in our day. Thus when Jesus asks whether it's right to save life, by this action, on the Sabbath, he's metaphorically talking about salvation - heaven, the endless Day of the Lord.

So the hand symbolises power. David says to Saul, that if God rescued him from the hands (paws) of lion and bears, won't he save him also from the Philistine's *hand*, from Goliath's power? David takes up his staff in his *hand*. His hand picks up the stones from the brook, and he has his sling in his *hand*. His speech to the Philistine, throwing back at him his own threats about what he would do to his dead body, he says "This day the Lord will give you into my *hand*." and he expands on this prophecy. God's ways are not man's ways: "The Lord saves not with sword or spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our *hand*." David's actions are done in faith. "And David put his *hand* into his bag..." and in trust in God's ways: "There was no sword in the *hand* of David."

There was no sword in the hand of the deacon Saint Vincent, who was martyred in 304, except the sword which is the Word of God. In his littleness, Vincent stood for Christ and God's People against the might of the Roman Imperial system. He refused to allow the scriptures to be given over and burned. Despite the tortures and agonies he suffered, he refused to give up his faith in God's Word. Broken physically, but not spiritually, his witness converts even his jailer, before he finally expires. Vincent's courage in his martyrdom, though, is only possible through the hand of God. His heroic endurance is not from his own strength, but the strength that God gives him.

When we put our hand up to do what God wants us to do, there need be no sword in it. God doesn't rely on our own abilities, on worldly power, on riches, strength, reputation, intelligence, or great systems. The Earth is the Lord's - his hands made it. He only requires us to be faithful. If we are small, the greater the glory is when God makes us triumph over our foes. If we are weak, sinful, beset by great oppositions, within or without, then the more meritorious the struggle, and the more faith-filled must be our fight against our own flesh, and against the world's vanities, on the Lord's behalf. The Lord of the Sabbath wants to save our lives. Staff, stones, and a sling, may not seem much against stature, sword and shield, but God, who regards the lowly, will take our littleness and magnify it so that beyond all expectations and predictions of the pundits and naysayers, God's hand will get the victory for us.