

Second Sunday of Lent March 12, 2017

Readings: Genesis 12:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:8-10; Matthew 17:1-9

Today's readings speak of our call to holiness, of true greatness, of faith and trust in God and the ultimate glory that awaits us. We encounter a God who speaks to us and we are called upon to listen to him and respond to him. Now as we enter the Second Week of Lent, our task is to continue to examine our hearts and to repent in order to prepare ourselves for the glorious paschal mystery. As human beings we do not like change. We do not like change and we resist it as much as we can. But as much as we resist, change is a part of our life. We grow from infant to child to adult. We move from one place to another in search of new things and new way of living. We know that we are pilgrims on a journey to a more permanent dwelling place, a place of total union with our God of Truth and Love. In this context the First Reading from the Book of Genesis tells us of the Divine calling of Abraham to become the spiritual father of the people of God. He shows faith in God's word which will lead him to many blessings. He trusts God who has called him and moves to the unknown destination and is made the Father of a nation. The Gospel of today speaks of striking interventions by God in people's lives indicated through the transfiguration of Jesus on the Mountain. Jesus is transfigured in the presence of his disciples, manifesting to them his divinity to strengthen them in their faith before he enters into his Passion and death on the cross. In the second reading Paul encourages Timothy to persevere in his efforts for the Gospel. He can depend on God's help because of the grace bestowed on him by Jesus.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Genesis involves the Divine calling of Abraham to become the spiritual father of the people of God. The appearance of Abraham in history marked a new era. The Lord called Abram to take his relatives and to depart from his country and his father's house to the land that the Lord would show. He was asked to sacrifice all familiar places and the people he knew and move to a new place shown by God himself. His trust in God will lead to his blessings. Abram did not take the initiative to communicate with God or to seek His blessings. Rather, it was Yahweh who made the first move. But God makes his own demands of Abram. First, he was required to completely disassociate himself from his pagan past. Secondly, he was required to migrate to a land of God's choice. God makes a promise to Abram, that of him, He would make a great

nation, that He would bless him and make great his name so that Abram would be a blessing to many. God now builds a new relationship with him. He tells him that through him all families on earth will be blessed and all those who stand with him will be blessed by God. Abram loved God and lived his life searching for God's voice and being a religiously obedient, left all his security and surroundings and entered the unknown. Abram accepts this call in faith and with him a new nation is formed. However God makes it clear that this gift he receives is gratuitous.

Today's Second Reading from the Second Letter of Timothy is a reminder that God calls each person and he has not stopped communicating to people. God wants everyone to be holy, reminding that all believers have received their life and immortality through the Gospel. Therefore, a special call is given to join in the suffering for the gospel. For the good news can entail hardships. In the midst of sufferings, a person is called to rely on the power of God. Paul indicates that God offers us salvation and sanctification as a pure gift and not as the result of our works. His calling is according to His own purpose and grace and this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. In His foreknowledge of sin entering the world, the Lord God had planned to dispense His loving and merciful grace through Jesus. Now Timothy is asked to preach the Gospel despite the fact that Paul was in prison at that time. But Paul and Timothy recognize that God's word is a Gospel of power, of salvation, of the expression of God's eternal purpose, of immortal life in Jesus Christ. This was before the age of God's people when the Law had been given to mankind, before the age that covered from Adam to Moses, and even before the age of Adam in the Garden Eden. But now, through the incarnation of our Saviour Jesus Christ, death has been abolished, life and immortality has been brought to light through the Gospel.

The Gospel of today gives us the beautiful story of Transfiguration. Matthew tells us that Jesus took with him his three beloved disciples Peter, James and John to a high Mountain, apart and in their presence he was transfigured. When he was transfigured before them, his face shone like the Sun and his garments became white as snow. Moses the greatest law giver and Elijah the greatest prophet of Israel come to the side of Jesus and talk to him about his passion and death. For Jesus this was a special moment. He was now close to Jerusalem and hence close to his passion and death by crucifixion. This was the important moment when he had to strengthen his disciples particularly the ones who had been chosen to be close to him during his ministry. Jesus wanted his sonship to be revealed to them

with the voice of the Father telling them that Jesus is his Beloved Son in whom he is well pleased and they ought to listen to him. These were the same words used at Jordan during his Baptism as he began his ministry. Secondly, when his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white, the event may have testified to the fact that Jesus was the true Light which enlightens everyone. Thirdly, the transfiguration foreshadowed the eternal reign of Jesus as God and King in Heaven. The Book of Revelation tells us that there will be no more night and there is no need of light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light. For Jesus this was the confirmation of his mission given by his Father and the confidence that he has been faithful to him to the end.

The Gospel tells us that all on a sudden Moses and Elijah are seen talking with Jesus. Their presence is very significant. They represent the two great traditions of the Old Testament: Moses personified the Law of God's people and Elijah the traditions of the great prophets. Their presence and their talking with Jesus indicate their total endorsement of all that Jesus is doing and also of all that he will experience in the days to come. Jesus is the natural continuation of their Jewish tradition and is fully part of it. Therefore, the disciples need have no misgivings about anything they have heard from Jesus about his coming destiny. This happened "six days" after the declaration of Jesus as Messiah. It is perhaps a reminder that it was after six days that God called Moses into the cloud of glory on Mount Sinai. Also in biblical times revelations often took place on mountain tops. There has been much speculation about which mountain in Palestine was the 'Mount of the Transfiguration' but it does not really matter. Mountain is the place where God is present as shown repeatedly in the Old Testament. Other symbols of divine presence are also used here such as cloud, thunder, light, tent, voice and place apart.

Peter had just, in the name of the other disciples, recognized their Teacher, Jesus, as the expected Messiah of Israel. It was a climactic moment in Jesus' relationship with his disciples that at least his chosen people had discovered his messiahship. But Jesus immediately clarifies with them the true meaning of the Messiah. Far from being a mighty powerful king who would crush all the enemies of God's people, he would be rejected by the leaders of his own people, arrested, tried, condemned, tortured and eventually executed not by them but by their much hated enemies, namely the Romans, whom they expected the Messiah to overthrow. Peter in fact was not able to accept this explanation and in turn

gets severely reprimanded by Jesus for not accepting the ways of God. Now on the Mountain having experienced the vision Peter with his usual impulsive way enthusiastically suggests building three tents or shrines for Jesus, Moses and Elijah so they could stay on the mountain forever. Tent was the symbol of God's presence. It was a wonderful divine experience that the disciples had. Humanly speaking, when situations are good, we would like them to stay that way forever. Unfortunately, life is seldom like that for our life has to move on. It is true of Jesus and it is true of his followers.

As Peter was speaking tells the gospel, a bright cloud covered them. The cloud in the Old Testament is a symbol of the presence of God. This was a bright and luminous cloud through which God spoke. From the cloud they heard a voice, the voice of God himself: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" These are the exact words spoken at the baptism of Jesus. This identifies who Jesus is, confirming his divinity as God's son. We see that the emphasis is not on seeing the transfigured Jesus but on listening to him. He will speak with authority. This is an endorsement of Jesus and of all that he will experience, including his rejection by his people and his suffering and death on the way to life and victory. The invitation to "Listen to him" is directed at Peter and to others. To listen to Jesus is to hear what he says and identify with him fully. So far, the disciples have not been doing this. Now at the sound of God's voice, the disciples prostrate themselves on the ground, terrified. It seems like an easy, straight-forward command, yet it seems so very difficult for them to follow. What they have experienced will guide them through the passion and death. What is important about the Transfiguration is not so much what happened on the mountain but what happens when they come down.

The father tells the disciples to listen to Jesus. True listening requires a response from the listener, attending to what was said, recognizing its meaning, and making it part of the person's inner, conscious experience. God speaks to us in so many ways. One person may barely notice a patch of blue sky, whereas the person of prayer, who listens to God, sees in it the dome of heaven. St. John of the Cross once pointed out that many of the people who think they are listening to God are actually only listening to themselves. First of all we need to learn to listen to what life is saying in the present moment before trying to shape our prayer. Too often we make the world just a projection of our own desires and fears. Second, when life gives us its message, we should make the understanding

of that message the first object of our prayer. At the foundation of the prayer of life is the virtue of hope, and hope is the grace to believe that whatever events occur, they will contain the necessary ingredients of our salvation. Third, once we have received the message of life we must attempt to integrate it with our efforts to live by the Gospel. The Gospel must be the focal point of our lives. Finally we need to pray and listen to what God says and yet we know God has no need of our prayer, in fact the very desire to pray be a gift from God.

Suddenly there is a change at the end of this episode. They hear the gentle voice of Jesus who tells them to rise and not to be afraid. They look up and see Jesus standing there alone. They would have been surprised that the Father is gone, Moses and Elijah are gone. From now on they will see only Jesus but, after this experience, they know that he is not alone, that he has the full backing of his Father and of the Jewish tradition of the Law and the Prophets. They were learning the lesson that, though Jesus the Messiah would be rejected, suffer and die at the hands of his own people and their enemies, glory and victory would follow. Being on the mountain was a wonderful experience but the real place is on earth with the people of God. Thus once the supernatural event is over, Jesus and his disciples go down the mountain. There Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about the vision till he is raised from the dead. For it was not yet the time for the world to know and understand that Jesus was closing the age of the Law and the Prophets. Today as we listen to his Word the Father still speaks to us and tells us that Jesus is his beloved son and we ought to listen to him, for he has the words of eternal life. For the disciples unknown to them the glory of Jesus' transfiguration was preparing them to accept the scandal of the cross. They would understand this only later with the resurrection. Today let us look beyond the pain of life and see the presence of God in our world, and the gift of life that God makes to each of us. Let us listen to him intently and put his words into practice.

A Church goer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. "I've gone for 30 years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all." This started a real controversy in the "Letters to the Editor" column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on for weeks until someone wrote this clincher: "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for

the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this. They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today."

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