

Second Sunday of Lent February 21, 2016

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28b-36

God's call is personal and at the same time very demanding. It is an invitation to enter into his holiness with an attitude of faith and total trust in the Divine. We encounter a God who speaks to us and we are called upon to listen to him and respond to him. During the season of Lent he invites us to convert ourselves and become like him as he prepared himself to the mission of his Father. As we now enter the Second Week of Lent, our task is to continue to examine our hearts and change ourselves in order to be worthy of his glorious paschal mystery. We are called to continue to examine our hearts and to repent in order to prepare ourselves for the glorious Resurrection of Christ. God tells us that our thoughts are not like his thoughts and our ways are not akin to those of his choice. As human beings we do not like change and we resist any change as much as we can. However, change is a part of our life and we cannot just depend on our past glory and achievements. 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. The readings of today invite us to reflect on the paradox of our Christian faith that we belong here and we do not belong here. It is in this world and through this world that we are to find our God. That is the goal of living and we need to keep it constantly before our eyes. Whatever we do on earth has its consequence in our life to come. While we are expected to be fully involved in our life here contributing to the fulfilment of the Kingdom, we are reminded that our final citizenship is in Heaven.

The First Reading of today marks a significant stage in Abraham's journey of faith. Though still struggling with doubt Abraham is led to make sufficient progress to put his faith in the Lord. He had been asked to leave his homeland and to go and live in a strange place. If he did so, he was promised a great future for his family and descendants. Without any further guarantees, Abram sets out. His readiness to put his trust in God's word became legendary in the tradition of Israel and is echoed again in the New Testament. "Abram put his faith in the Lord, who counted this as making him justified," that is, putting him right with God. At this time Abraham had no children and he expresses this to the Lord. Although ready to do what God asked of him, Abraham asked for some confirmation. God had assured him of a great dynasty as numerous as the stars of heaven. He shows it to Abraham through the bond or a covenant. God tells him to make an offering of some animals and to cut the animals in half, putting one half on each side. Typically a covenant partner would walk between the two portions to show his loyalty and building of the new bond. At sunset, as Abram fell into a deep sleep and as the sun set and

darkness came on, a blazing furnace and a firebrand indicating God's presence came between the divided offerings. From this experience Abram knew his trust in God was justified.

In the Second Reading taken from the Letter to the Philippians, we heard Paul telling the new Christians that our citizenship is in Heaven, that is, the goal and destination of our life is to be one with God. There is no other goal available to us. Paul explains to them that from heaven i.e. from God comes the Saviour we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body. He will do that by the same power with which he can subdue the whole universe. At the same time we do not belong to this world because Christ died for us so that we may be made righteous through Him. Through His death on the Cross as the sacrificial Lamb, we qualify to inherit the salvation that awaits all those who persevere in their living faith. Since Christ died for us, we are indebted to Him for the gifts of righteousness, salvation and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. We are indebted to Christ for what awaits us after the last trumpet. At that moment, in the twinkle of an eye, we will all be changed in the image of Christ. Eventually Jesus will come to save us and will transform our lowly bodies like his own glorious body. Paul who had given himself to Christ crucified encouraged his community through his own example to follow Christ crucified and thus be transformed into him.

In today's Gospel Reading we have the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the Mountain. Luke explains that just before the transfiguration, Peter, in the name of his fellow-disciples, had made the dramatic acknowledgement that Jesus, their teacher, was the Messiah, the Christ, the Saviour King expected by Israel. Having confirmed Peter in his mission as the "rock" and foundation upon which he would build his Church, Jesus begins to instruct them about what it will mean to be companions of the Messiah. The Messiah, their Jesus, will become a hunted figure, hunted not by foreigners but by the rulers of his own people. Now to strengthen them in their faith Jesus takes Peter, John and James up on a mountain, Mount Tabor in Galilee. Jesus certainly could have taken with him the twelve apostles, and invited them all to contemplate his glory in the Mystery of his Transfiguration. But he did not do so. For he wanted to give us a sign: that of divine election. What the Mystery of the Transfiguration realizes in Jesus is the glorification of human nature, elevated by God to the most profound intimacy, in limitless charity, with divine nature itself. Jesus-Man is truly transfigured: the glory of divinity is reflected in a dazzling way on his face and on his entire being. But this is also, and especially, a sign for the men and women who are called by God to share in his infinite happiness.

It was out of the abundance of his divine love that God gave the glimpse of his future glory of Christ in his risen humanity to the three disciples at that memorable occasion. Christ is also shown with two of his faithful servants, Moses and Elijah also in glory. God understands the human weaknesses and he wanted to strengthen them in their faith as they would be scandalized with the sufferings and cross. Hence three of Jesus' most intimate disciples are brought to "the mountain". We do not know which mountain but, in general, mountains in Scripture are holy places, places where God is especially felt to be present. While they were on the mountain, the appearance of the face of Jesus changed and His clothing became dazzling white. As we heard, that event did not pass unnoticed. Peter and the other two disciples witnessed the glory of the Lord Jesus. Here Peter, James and John had an experience of Jesus totally transformed in his appearance. The light of God shone through him. They witnessed, as far as it is humanly possible to see with the human eyes, the brilliance that comes with the transforming glory that awaits those who will be changed in the image of Jesus Christ. What the Mystery of the Transfiguration realizes in Jesus is the glorification of human nature, elevated by God to the most profound intimacy, in limitless charity, with divine nature itself. Jesus-Man is truly transfigured: the glory of divinity is reflected in a dazzling way on his face and on his entire being.

Luke tells us that Jesus prayed. Now, Jesus did not pray as if he had to ask his Father for some power he did not have: Jesus is both God and Man, and he is the Almighty. Thus, if Jesus prayed, and he did do so, it was to give us an example to follow, it was to be the sign of humanity glorified by the Father, in the Spirit. Thus, when Jesus prays with the three apostles Peter, John and James, he does so in order to tell us, by way of a sign, that only a few men (or women) respond to the call of God. He desires the salvation of all the men and women he created in his Love. This is true, and it will always remain true until the end of the world. For this is our daily Transfiguration: Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ! Through it, we are already glorified and transfigured with Christ, going step by step on the sometimes smooth, sometimes difficult road of this earthly life.

Through the Mystery of his Transfiguration in the presence of Moses and Elijah, Jesus wanted to show his apostles, ahead of time, the Glory of his Resurrection. They would thus be better able to undergo the trial of the Cross and the Passion of their Master. We, too, can receive within us the risen Jesus in order to be better able to carry our daily cross. Jesus was accompanied by Moses and Elijah; two pillars of the Hebrew Testament, representing the Law and the Prophets, the whole Jewish tradition. Luke says they spoke with Jesus of his coming experiences in

Jerusalem. What is obviously implied is that Moses and Elijah fully recognised what would happen to Jesus as totally in conformity with the tradition they represented. The disciples, however, do still not fully understand what is happening; they were "heavy with sleep" but just managed to keep awake. As Moses and Elijah seemed to go away, Peter - impetuous as ever - blurted out: "Master, it is wonderful for us to be here! So let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." The Gospel comments that Peter did not know what he was saying. Clearly, this indicates that they were in totally a new atmosphere. Their vision had made them aware of the new reality of God. Tent in the Old Testament is identified with the presence of God.

Then there was the cloud around them. The cloud in the Biblical sense symbolises the presence of God, and this cloud covered them with a shadow and "the disciples were afraid". This was not indeed very realistic. They recognised the cloud immediately as the close presence of God himself. Then they heard God speak from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him." They are being told to remember the words Jesus just told them about the Messiah, who would be rejected, suffer and die shamefully. If they could not understand and accept those words, they would not know the real Jesus. To be his disciples they had to listen to him intently. As Jesus will tell them later, "A grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies." The suffering and death of Jesus are the seeds of new life for all of us. After the "voice" had spoken, they found themselves with Jesus alone, the same "ordinary" Jesus they always knew. But they kept silent. They had nothing to say but much still to learn and to understand about the Person and the Way of Jesus. What they needed was the gift of faith and total trust in Jesus and in God. They would grasp this fully only after the resurrection of Jesus.

At the Baptism the disciples were told to listen to Jesus. God had communicated that he was his beloved son the chosen one. Again they are asked to listen to him. He speaks to us continuously and we have to be open to listen to him. He speaks to us through his Word, through persons, through situations, our work, our joys and sufferings. Listening is an art. Listening is something essential in our life. Sometimes we do not listen to the other. Often our conversations can turn into monologues if we are not attentive to the other. Jesus calls us to be attentive and listen to him, the words of eternal Life. God tells them that Jesus is to be listened to and obeyed. He has the words of wisdom and in him all things are fulfilled. In other words he takes the place of the teachers of old and God's authority is behind him. Through his special voice God the Father proclaims Jesus as his own son, the chosen one.

The entire episode of the Transfiguration is intended to clarify the divine identity of Jesus. He is the Messiah, the God's chosen one, and who should be listened to. This is made clear from the voice that emerges from the cloud. Secondly, the transfiguration foreshadows Jesus' exaltation to heaven as recounted by Luke. Finally, the transfiguration story continues teaching the disciples of Jesus about the deeper mystery of who he is and what he is about. However, Luke does not want his audience to miss the general context of the transfiguration event. It takes place within the context of prayer. The motive of Jesus to withdraw to a mountain with the disciples was not to be transfigured but to pray. It is within this prayer context that extra ordinary things begin to happen as suddenly the appearance of the face of Jesus changes, his clothes become dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah appear to him in conversation. It is also within this same context that the voice from the cloud is heard. This is how Luke tells us today that within the context of prayer that God's presence is felt.

The transfiguration mystery of Jesus defies all explanation. It is what we generally term it a mystery. It is an encounter with the divine that is briefly experienced in the context of prayer. The transformation or transfiguration of Jesus that the disciples experienced was not simply something they were to see and experience as happening to him alone. It was also an invitation for them to undergo a transformation and transfiguration of their own. By listening to Jesus, listening to all that he invites us to be and to do, however much it may seem to go against the conventions we were brought up on. It means especially listening to those words of Jesus; It means having a total trust in walking his Way; it means a total trust that only his Way brings us into full union with God, the source of all Truth, Love, Happiness and Peace.

An officer, who had some urgent business to transact, reluctantly dialled an assistant at six o'clock in the morning. After several rings a sleepy female answered him saying that he had got the wrong number. He apologized and hung up and scouted in vain for his telephone diary to re-check the number. Sometime later he risked dialling again and he was embarrassed to hear the same voice of the early morning. Expecting a strong rebuff, he started to apologize profusely. But the lady interrupted him with warm reassuring words and said that she was sitting by the window and enjoying a bright and beautiful sunrise. She would have lost it but for his call. In her turn she thanked him generously for this gift.

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