

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Mark 9:2-10

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

REFLECTION 1: ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP

Isaac Newton, the 18th century mathematician and physicist, said about discovery: 'I keep the subject of my enquiry constantly before me and wait till the first dawning opens gradually, by little and little, into clear light.' For Jesus' disciples, the clear light took place on the mountaintop in today's Gospel (Mark 9: 2-11). The disciples kept Jesus constantly before them. Then, at the Transfiguration, the fullness of Jesus' divinity was shown in the heavenly light that streamed down upon them. With Moses and Elijah present, Jesus was affirmed by the voice in the cloud.

We may often wonder what the content of the conversation between Jesus and the two great figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, involved. Only one of the evangelists, Luke, tells us. Jesus spoke to them of his exodus which was to take place in Jerusalem. It would seem that Jesus felt the need to dialogue with these great figures of the First Testament, the Lawgiver and Prophet, about the ultimate goal of their mission of universal salvation, that he must undergo a cruel, yet healing 'exodus' on the timbers of Calvary to accomplish the will of the Father. Interesting that Mark notes that as they looked around, Peter James and John who accompanied Jesus on the mountain, 'saw no one with them any more but only Jesus'. Perhaps here lies the ultimate challenge of the Christian to see the world only through the lens of Jesus. At first reading, Peter's offer to set up camp might seem strange. However, Peter's joy had to do with the feast of Tabernacles (tents), celebrated each autumn by the Jews in order to give thanks for the harvest and in remembrance of their desert journey to the Promised Land, the Jewish people erected tents and lived in them for the duration of the feast. Peter thought he was witnessing the fulfillment of that promise and so, the desire to set up three tents to welcome the Messiah and his everlasting reign.

Change, transformation and transfiguration are words that describe a phenomenon with which all of us are quite familiar. This process of growing and changing are clearly and beautifully in evidence as the seasons change from one to the other – budding flowers, birds and singing, transform the winter landscape into spring. In his Transfiguration in glory before his disciples, Jesus invites each of us to enter into that experience where we are transformed not from without but from within – in the very depths of our being. That experience and that transfiguration will not be achieved by diet or even aging – the transformation we are blessed to experience arises from being in the presence of God. Throughout his ministry, as Jesus worked, healing the sick, tending to the poor and preaching the good news to all – he was offering a foretaste of the kingdom, Now he has risen and returned to the glory he has shared with God and so, the process of transformation continues in the efforts of his followers to become whole and holy and so help others to do the same.

As they came down from the mountain, Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. We carry within us a mystery, we discover in ourselves the power of the resurrection but often enough as through a glass darkly. We keep the secret of it like a seedling in the heart of our lives and share the glimpse of what we have seen when the Son of Man begins to rise from the dead in us.

REFLECTION 2: MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES

On the third of April 1968, the day before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jnr. spoke at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, USA. He shared with those present an imaginative view of the whole of human history up to that point in time. King spoke of ancient Rome and Greece and their philosophies, of the Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Even with the injustices perpetrated against African Americans, he was happy to be alive and able to serve his people. He concluded his address: 'like anybody, I would like to live a long life ... but I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land ... And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I do not fear any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the Lord.'

In today's first reading and Gospel, we experience two other mountaintop experiences, that of Abraham and the one Jesus shared with Peter, James and John. Abraham's story is shocking. He and Sarah had long awaited the birth of Isaac and had all but given up when three mysterious visitors, to whom, Abraham offered generous hospitality, told them to expect a son in a year's time (Gen: 18). Isaac's birth was a miracle; he was a beloved only son and yet God was asking for his life. And Abraham was ready to obey. The hard lesson here is to open us in faith and trust to a God who cannot be understood, who is beyond all our scheming and who rains on our outdoor concerts and allows humans to be inhuman. Only this God is worthy of our love, our allegiance. Abraham was totally dependent on this God. He did God's will. So must we, in good times and bad, no matter what.

In the Gospel, Mark tells us that Jesus went up a high mountain with Peter, James and John and was transfigured before them. As if to affirm the fact that this was a God-event (theophany), a cloud appeared. The cloud was a traditional symbol of the divine presence, and the voice from the cloud identified Jesus as God's Son and called upon Jesus' disciples to follow him. The experience of the disciples underscores the importance of getting away from it all, so as to gain a perspective that cannot be had in the midst of the fray. Perhaps the Psalmist put it best: 'Pause a while and know that I am God' (Ps. 46: 10).

These mountain experiences set the theme for Lent as a time to ease ourselves out of the hustle and bustle of everyday activity so as to pray quietly, searching for God's will, and then asking for the strength to make it our own. On our 'mountain' we can re-think our priorities, set goals and evaluate our relationship with God and with others.

Martin Luther King's mountaintop experience left him worry-free and resolute. He had no fear of the future. Abraham's faith was sorely tested on the mountain; his steadfast trust in God, his obedience resulted in his being blessed abundantly. Peter, James and John's experience was at once thrilling and terrifying, so much so that they wished to prolong it. As they descended from the mountain, Jesus offered them a reality check. They were told to keep the event quiet until, 'the Son of Man had risen from the dead'. Before there would be any more glimpses of glory, he would die. Jesus' words would be fully understood only after his death and resurrection.