

Sunday, February 21, 2016 2nd Sunday in Lent (C)

Conventual Mass

Transfiguration

There are many icons of the Transfiguration. Inevitably they show the top of a steep mountain. Over the peak of the mountain hover the figures of Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The figure of Jesus is set off by an aureole from which rays of light emanate. Peter, James and John lie prostrate in worship. In my favorite icon, however, the prostrate disciples seem to be falling off the mountain with their sandals flying off. I suppose that's the byzantine equivalent of saying that they had their socks knocked off. I like that. It depicts very well the deep emotion with which the disciples must have experienced the transfiguration of Jesus. The excited babbling of Peter fits well into this image without even needing a word bubble. The dazzling white of Jesus' garments, the blues, the golds and browns all contribute to the excitement of the mystery the icon depicts.

It had been a long ascent up the mountain and the disciples were tired. In addition, they were dealing with difficult and confusing thoughts. Just a few days earlier, Jesus had asked them who they thought he was. Peter had answered for them all, declaring that he was the Christ, the long awaited one who was to set Israel free. But then Jesus spoke darkly of his coming rejection and death at the hands of their leaders. He spoke of the cross and suffering. That went against all logic. The Christ, after all, was to set Israel free. Also troubling was the fact that in his latest teaching he expected his disciples to follow him on the same road. Where was the promised glory and victory? What kind of Messiah was this? It was all so wrong. It didn't fit in with reality.

As the Master withdrew a little to pray, they sat down escaping into sleep. Asleep they almost missed the reality that was taking place. It was only when they became fully awake that they saw what was happening – saw not only with the eyes of their bodies but the eyes of their spirits as well. Their whole consciousness suddenly became focused on the vision before them. Their heaviness, their conflicting thoughts and concerns all fell away from them as they beheld the radiant reality before them: the transfigured Christ with Moses and Elijah.

With this vision they were given assurance that what they had seen and heard in the presence of Christ was indeed the truth and somehow, no matter how these predictions of his would play out, his would be the victory. That he would be rejected and suffer there was no doubt because Jesus' heavenly companions were speaking to him of his coming exodus in Jerusalem.

The Exodus. That extraordinary time when God intervened to free the Israelites from oppression and slavery and lead them through Moses into the Promised Land. The historical exodus was to be a foreshadowing of Christ's exodus when he would free all the descendants of Adam and Eve scattered throughout the world from the tyranny of Satan, sin and death. Jesus by his obedience to the Father would be the new liberator, a liberator greater than Moses. Jesus' struggle was against principalities and powers. His victory would be the victory of divine light over the darkness of hell.

Last Sunday's gospel of the temptation pointed to the cross and the final temptation Jesus was to undergo on the cross: "If you are the King of the Jews,

save yourself' (Luke: 23:37)! This Sunday's gospel points to Easter and the full manifestation of who Christ really is: the beloved Son of God, the Word made flesh. We are commanded by the Father's voice to listen to Christ, for he alone has the words of eternal life.

As they came down from the mountain and resumed the ordinary course of their lives, the disciples could not have looked at Jesus in the same way that they had done before. They too must have borne the marks of the transfiguration of transformation. I don't see how they could have even looked at other people or even creation in the same way they had before. We can never see Christ as he really is and remain the same, whether we see him with the eyes of our senses or the eyes of our hearts.

True, when his hour had come all his followers would run away. Peter would betray him; John alone would stand steadfast beneath the cross. Terrified, they feared for their own skins. Fear made them forget what the three had experienced. But they would with his help find their way back to him. When the day of Resurrection came and it became obvious who he was, the foretaste the three had had on Mt. Tabor fell into place. They worshipped their Lord and found their joy in his presence.

We too are called to join Peter, James and John on the Mount of the Transfiguration. In our case it probably won't be a mountain but rather an office, a classroom, a kitchen, perhaps even a church. It is in the ordinary routine of our lives that Jesus finds us. It usually isn't with the eyes and ears of our senses, but it will always be with the eyes and ears of our hearts. And these encounters will

transform our lives, give us the courage to walk through life until we arrive at our destination with him. As we are transformed and transfigured we become agents of drawing others to Jesus without even saying a word, our hearts “overflowing with the inexpressible delights of love” (RB Prol: 49).

During our Oblate Retreat last weekend, Sr. Kathryn Huber, our retreat master, told us about Alice. Alice has been in an Ohio prison for 25 years and will probably be there for a very long time. During her time in prison, she has like Peter, James and John come to realize who Christ really is and has undergone a spiritual transformation. Recently, she asked to receive instruction as a Benedictine oblate and Sr. Kathryn is her mentor. She has learned to love everyone she encounters and to find silence within the noise of the prison. Prison, she wrote to Sr. Kathryn, is a paradox, a noisy, crowded place in which there is profound loneliness, even though prisoners are never alone. Alice is trying in this environment to follow RB Chapter 72, to do what is better for others rather than what is better for ourselves. All of us, no matter who we are or where life finds us are called to share in Christ’s transfigured and resurrected life, to work with Christ in the transfiguration and transformation of the world.

At the end of our reading we are told that the disciples fell silent. They were silent but must have often reflected in their lives their experience on Mt. Tabor as well as the resurrection it foreshadowed. Lent is a good time for us also to reflect not only on the experience of these three disciples but also on our experience of who Christ is for us and how to integrate his teaching in our lives. “This is my chosen Son, listen to him.”

