

2nd Sunday of Lent, Year A

Last Sunday the liturgy invited us to look at sin in our lives. Sin acts like hardening of the arteries. It obstructs the flow of grace into our hearts, and if it is serious and obstinate enough it can completely block the flow of love from God and bring death to our soul. Our deepest longing is to be in love, giving and receiving love. We can love only to the extent that we are open to God who is love, and sin weakens and can even destroy this openness. Today we look at this basic desire and longing which is in every human heart. We speak of it as a longing to 'see God' or to 'behold the face of God'. It is a longing for a profound love-communion with God and so with all whom God loves and with the world made in love by God.

It is traditional to imagine our search for God in terms of climbing a mountain. As man, Jesus, too, was on a journey to see God's face, and so Matthew pictures him climbing a high mountain, taking with him three of his first disciples: Peter, James and John. It is important to note where this scene appears in the Gospel. It is immediately after Jesus has spoken of his coming death and resurrection (Matthew 16:21) and of the fact that his disciples will have to walk the same road with him (16:25). It is no accident that it is Peter, James and John who are with Jesus again on another mountain, the Mount of Olives, as Jesus enters into his agony (26:37). Suffering comes into everyone's life in one way or another. Jesus is showing us that there is a way through suffering. It need not impede our journey as we are drawn into God's loving embrace.

Moses is pictured in the scene. In fact Matthew's scene is based on the portrait of Moses found in the book of Exodus. There we see Moses ascending Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:12, 24:15-18; 34:3). A cloud descends on him (Exodus 24:15-18; 34:5), and God speaks to him from the cloud (Exodus 24:16). Moses becomes radiant (Exodus 34:29-30,35) and those who see his radiance become afraid (Exodus 34:30). Matthew clearly intends to make a comparison between Jesus and Moses. We shall return to this shortly.

Elijah is in our scene for the same reason. In the Book of Kings we are told that he wanted to see God and so he journeyed 'forty days and forty nights' to the mountain of Moses. On his arrival he was instructed by God: 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave'(1Kings 19:11-13).

On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus is gazing on God's face and listening to God's voice. His whole being is caught up in God's glory, 'and his face shone like the sun'(see Exodus 34:29). It is Jesus who brings the Law represented here by Moses, and the Prophets, represented here by Elijah, to their fulfilment, but he also goes beyond them, for he is God's 'Son, the beloved' with whom God is 'well pleased'.

Peter, James and John are told that it is to Jesus that they are to listen (see Deuteronomy 18:15). So it is that when the three disciples looked up 'they saw no one except Jesus himself alone'('alone' is emphatic in the original Greek text). Moses and the Prophets prepared the way

for Jesus. Now, however, God's word is revealed fully in him. We are to listen to Moses and Elijah now only as their words are reflected in the life of Jesus. We are to see them through Jesus' eyes and listen to them with Jesus' heart, for we need to hear all God's words come to us now through him.

To read the Old Testament in any other way runs the risk of our failing to listen to God. This was the warning Paul gave to the community at Corinth. Speaking of his Jewish confreres who were opposing Christianity, Paul writes: 'To this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ... And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image'(2Corinthians 3:15-18). It is by looking at Jesus and by listening to him that we see the face of God and hear God's word.

The reaction of the disciples to God's word is instructive: 'they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear'. We should resist the tendency to take God's presence and action in our lives for granted. Love is always a gift and somewhat of a surprise. It should always fill us with a sense of awe and wonder. This is especially true of God's love however it comes to us. This sense of awe is not meant to paralyse us, and we are certainly not meant to be afraid of God, our Father. This is made clear by the touching conclusion of our scene. Jesus comes up to his disciples and touched them gently and says: 'get up and do not be afraid'. Jesus' touch is always healing (see Matthew 8:3;15; 9:20,21,29; 14:36).

So the liturgy of this Second Sunday of Lent focuses our attention on Jesus. He is about to be even more intimate with us, for in communion he approaches us and enters into the very centre of our being, there to draw us into communion with God and heal us from the effects of sin.

The first reading reminds us of God's desire to bless everyone through Abraham. This is the very core of our identity as Catholic Christians. We are committed to being open to every nation of the world and every person. We pray and we work in order to draw everyone to climb the mountain with Jesus - to see God and to experience his touch. I remind you of the opening words of the central document of Vatican II, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation **which is meant for everyone**'(GS §1). As we contemplate Jesus on the mountain, let us pray for those who are preparing to join the Catholic community this Easter. Let us also think of anyone whom we think might like to enjoy the intimacy of the communion that we share. Perhaps God is inspiring you to open your heart to welcome them here.

I conclude with the final words of today's Responsorial Psalm. These beautiful words also conclude the Church's famous hymn of praise called the Te Deum: 'May your love be upon us, O Lord, for we place all our hope in you'(Psalm 33:22). As we spend some time today accepting Jesus' invitation to go with him to the mountain, may his love be upon each of us. May we place our hope in him and may we experience the wonder of God's love embracing our lives.