

Homily Feb 11 2024

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

When I prepare a homily, I start by looking at all the readings for the day. I'm looking for a common theme – a thread that weaves its way between the readings. Sometimes it's hard to see but as I looked at today's readings the theme that began to emerge was light.

Light. Certainly the light in 2 Kings describing “the chariot of fire and horses of fire” that separated Elijah and Elisha before Elijah was taken to heaven on the whirlwind. Certainly in 2 Corinthians the “Light (which) will shine out of darkness’... in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God”. Certainly in Mark the blazing splendor of Jesus on the mountaintop as “his clothes became dazzling, bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them”. The light of Jesus that beamed so brightly on that mountaintop before they began the journey down the hill and toward that day in Jerusalem. Light that flamed on the glorious ascension of Christ, and in that upper room on Pentecost.

*Pause*

Do you remember the hymn ‘Christ Upon the Mountain peak Stands Alone in Glory Blazing’? Hymn number 129. That hymn tells the story of today's gospel reading from Mark. Now I'm not going to ask you to get your hymnals out and sing this hymn - although if we had an organist today I might - but instead let's talk about this reading.

This reading is about an event that took place well into Jesus's ministry. It was the autumn before the first Easter, so perhaps six months before he took that ride into Jerusalem on the back of a

donkey. But on this day Jesus chose three of his disciples, Peter, James and John to accompany him on a hike up a mountain side. They went, the three disciples of course having no idea of what would await them. They had been traveling with Jesus for a couple years, listening to him preach and watching him perform miracles.

Yet the belief that their friend, their teacher, this son of a carpenter, that Jesus was the son of God wasn't firmly in their heads yet, not even in Peter's head, despite his declaration, some six days earlier "you are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matthew chapter 16: verse 16). It was hard for them to believe that this man they knew so well would have to go to his death and rise again in fulfillment of the scriptures. Their encounter on the mountaintop would begin to change that.

When they arrived at the mountaintop, they saw their teacher and friend transfigured, his garments dazzling bright. They saw him walking and talking with two great patriarchs of Judaism; Moses, the prophet, who brought the law from God and Elijah the prophet who was taken up to heaven alive in a whirling wind. Now I don't know why the three disciples were able to recognize Moses and Elijah, but they clearly did and they were confused. How could they deal with this? What could they think about it? How could they feel when the man they have been following for several years is suddenly transfigured. How did they feel? How would you feel?

Now most of us know Peter from the Bible stories that we hear each Sunday. Peter is a disciple with feet of clay. He never stops being an ordinary guy. So on this mountaintop, Peter - typically impulsive - blurts out "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Why would Peter say this? Well perhaps it was as Mark says that he didn't know what to say ... so he filled in the space by saying the first thing that came into his mind. Or perhaps Peter in all his humanness wanted to be a good host and provide shelter for these wonderful guests.

Now this is a little side bar and I'd like to ask you to indulge me in it. I have always wondered why Jesus chose Peter to be his disciple, and to be the one on whom he would build his church? Peter is so, so – human, full of all the weakness and mistakes that we all are subject to. I wonder if Peter represents us in his relationship with Jesus. If Peter hadn't spoken up, if it had been Jesus, Moses and Elijah and three silent awestruck disciples would there have been a place for us on that mountain top? It seems to me that Peter made room for us there in his simple humanness. And I wonder if that's why he was chosen.

Well, as it turns out a great mist came, and they could no longer see the three figures. But before it dispersed, a voice came from it and said "This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Then when the mist lifted, Jesus was alone again, looking like his ordinary self. And the four men began to make their way down the mountain to join the rest of the disciples on the plain below.

How hard it must've been to make sense of this. This man they knew and loved; this man they traveled with and ate with - He was the son of God? Both man and God? How could it be and yet that "voice from the Majestic glory" (2 Peter 1:17) had just told them that. How could they understand it?

And yet I suppose they must have wanted to shout it from the mountaintop! To go down into the valley and tell everyone they met! But on the way down the mountain, Jesus "ordered them to

tell no one about what they had seen, until after the son of man had risen from the dead“.

Why would that be?

Could it be that the world was not yet ready to hear this message? Could it be that the disciples themselves were not yet ready to hear this message? They had seen so many miraculous things in their time with Jesus. So many healings, so many demons cast out – miracles like feeding the 5,000 and walking on water. What more do they need? And yet I suspect that, even after the transfiguration, James and John, even Peter went on thinking that Jesus would be the Messiah who would break the rule of Rome and restore Israel. It may have taken an even greater miracle to finally convince these disciples that truly their friend and teacher was the son of God. But certainly after Christ was risen, and after Pentecost, the message would have resonated, would have been reassuring, to any still wavering in their faith.

There are always many ways to look at readings in the Bible but one of them is to ask the question what is the purpose of this reading? How did these events impact the people who were involved in them (which we've been exploring). The second one is how did the retelling of these events affect early Christians and indeed Christians today.

Today's reading is from Mark, the earliest of the gospels written. Its dated between 60 and 70 AD so about 30 years after the death of Christ. Although it's not known for sure whether Mark indeed was the author, it is possible that the person who wrote this gospel could have been in Jerusalem on those fateful days. The historical Mark was a cousin of the apostle Barnabas, and traveled both with Paul and then later with Peter. Whether he or someone else was the

author, the retelling of the Transfiguration agrees closely with Peter's accounting of it. In 2 Peter Chapter 1: verses 16-18, it reads:

"For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain."

But I have still one other question – why is there a story of the Transfiguration? If no one except the three disciples, and Jesus himself were allowed to know about it, until after Jesus is crucified, and rises from the dead, why would God have chosen that point in time for the transfiguration?

Did that mountaintop experience in fact sustain the Peter, James and John in the months that followed? And was their steadfast faith in days after Christ's death and resurrection supported by the vision of Christ on the mountain top?

And what about us? Did that event which kindled a light in the breasts of the disciples still kindle a light in us?

You know, most of us do not have a "transfiguring" experience in our lives – we don't encounter Jesus or God directly. For most of us, the scripture and the guidance we gain from it and from those who preach about it help us keep a small light alive in our hearts. And perhaps the light that is spoken of in today's scripture for most of us is simply that small light. It is our job as we come here to Sunday service, midweek prayers and bible study to keep that small light burning through prayer and learning and community. I don't believe

most of us will to go to a mountaintop and hear the voice of God but I believe we can do what we're called to do to keep the light of Christ burning in our hearts.

Amen