

Second Sunday of Lent

The Transfiguration

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"This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him."

We have heard much the same words before, at Jesus' calling at his baptism in January. Here Jesus' calling is revealed by the Father to his closest disciples. Their teacher and friend is God's own son.

What does it mean, though, to be a son of God?

Last week as we read of Jesus temptations in the desert we learned what it does not mean. It does not mean getting whatever you want, it does not mean having the world at your feet, it does not mean that your life becomes a dazzling spectacle.

Although, here, Jesus does become a dazzling spectacle, for a moment. But there is a difference to the dazzle. This is not glitz and glamor. This is not a stunt to wow the crowds. This is an intimate revelation to his closest followers of who their friend Jesus really is--a revelation that this man whom they have been following, this thirty-something who has given his own life over to the poor and the sinful, the outcast and the despised, that this young man is the very glory of God.

He appears to Peter, James and John in the company of Moses and Elijah. Why Moses and Elijah? Partly because these two had both encountered the glory of God face to face in their own lives. Moses is said to have encountered God face to face on Mt Sinai. It is said that afterwards his face beamed like the sun, so much so that he had to keep it veiled. Elijah is also said to have encountered the glory of God. He was fleeing from his enemies, escaping into the forbidding wilderness of that same Mt Sinai. He was hiding behind a rock, when he had a vision that God himself would soon pass by. Shortly thereafter he was enveloped in a thunderstorm. Elijah poked up his head and peered into the thunderstorm. But God was not in the thunderstorm. A whirlwind followed but the glory of God was not in the whirlwind either. Then an earthquake, but still no God--and then a gentle breeze, and Elijah threw himself on the ground in fear and trembling. Here too, Peter, James and John behold the Glory of God in their friend and master.

This is not the only reason for Jesus to appear flanked by Moses and Elijah. They also represent the two parts of the Old Testament--the Law and the Prophets. To be the son of God, to be the very glory of God himself, means to live as Moses lived--a life devoted to God and God's people, with all one's heart and soul, mind and strength. To be the son of God, to be the very glory of God, also means to proclaim to all, as Elijah did, not one's own words, but God's Word. In short to be the son of God, to be the very glory of God means to live not for oneself alone, but to place one's life in God's hands.

As Abraham is called to do in today's first reading: called to leave his homeland and venture forth with his family into the unknown, called to place his faith not in his own resources but in God's promise. "Count the stars if you can" God tells Abraham. "My plans for you are no smaller."

Paul reminds us that God's plan for each one of us is no less than his promise to Abraham; that our destiny too is as vast, as awe-inspiring as the very heavens themselves. That God calls us to a relationship with him no less intimate than that enjoyed by a Moses or an Elijah. That our own true identity is hardly less than that of Jesus himself--that we too have been chosen by God as his beloved sons and daughters. As one of the earliest fathers of the Church, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, had written at the close of the second century. We too are the glory of God, you and I, when we are fully alive, radiate God's glory.

What then does it mean to be a child of God? It means to be fully alive, not asleep or in a stupor, but awake and alert. It does not mean to get whatever we want. It does not mean to have the world at our feet. It does not mean to dazzle one another---to be truly alive does not mean to be filled with oneself, but to be filled with the love of others--ultimately to be a child of God is to be transfigured. It is to surrender one's own self-will to God's will--to die to the law of the ego, and arise to the law of love. It is to muster the faith to place one's life in God's hands, that in our own poverty and weakness, the glory of God might shine through.

God's adoption of us as his own sons and daughters is a free gift, but that does not mean that it does not cost us. Christ's transfiguration is framed by predictions of his passion. Such is the price of our transfiguration as well. To be transfigured into a child of God is to be transfigured into Christ, and to be transfigured into Christ we must live like Christ; we must, like Abraham, venture forth beyond the seemingly safe confines of our own self-interest, we must, like Moses, submit to the law of love, we must like Elijah, proclaim through our own lives, not our own "I, me, mine" but the very glory of God.

May we rise to the challenge.