

Homily for the Second Sunday of Lent, Year A

March 5, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Genesis 12:1-4a (All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in Abram.)

Responsory: Psalm 33 (Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.)

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 1:8b-10 (Bear your share of hardship for the gospel.)

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9 (The Transfiguration of the Lord.)

Last week we saw Jesus in the desert — fasting, praying, and being unsuccessfully tempted by the devil. This week he's on the mountaintop, where his glory is revealed to three of his disciples. The imagery is startling and dramatic, with Jesus' clothes becoming dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah suddenly appearing beside him. Yet, when all is said and done, Jesus seems totally unchanged by the experience. After hearing the voice from the cloud, the disciples look around and see Jesus alone with them. He's no longer radiant. He's no longer speaking with Moses and Elijah. He looks no different from when they ascended the mountain. But, I'm guessing that those three disciples would never see Jesus in quite the same way as they had before. That mountaintop experience would change *them*, once they could grasp the true meaning of what they had seen and heard.

The Transfiguration is one of those rare moments in the New Testament in which God the Father speaks, to testify to his Son. God did a lot of talking in the Old Testament, mostly through his prophets. But, once the Word of God became flesh in Jesus, there was no more need for God the Father to speak through other human beings. The only times he makes his voice heard are at Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration — two epiphanies, in which the Father solemnly declares Jesus to be his beloved Son. However, at the Transfiguration, the voice from the cloud also utters a *command*: "Listen to him." I suppose one could interpret that as a generic command *always* to listen to Jesus, whenever he speaks. However, the context in which *this* command is given suggests a more specific meaning.

Just before Jesus leads Peter, James and John up the mountain, he predicts for the first time that he must suffer at the hands of the religious authorities and be put to death, but then rise again on the third day. Peter's response to this foreshadowing of the Passion is to take Jesus aside and rebuke him for saying such crazy things. After all, Peter had just proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, and Jesus had praised his Heavenly Father for revealing this great insight to one of his disciples. The notion that God's Anointed One could suffer and die at the hands of corrupt and evil men was unthinkable. It defied all human logic. But that was precisely the point. Jesus turns on Peter and harshly rebukes him for thinking as *human beings* do, not as God does. That interchange between Jesus and Peter at the base of the mountain sets the stage for what happens at the top. It also explains why Peter misinterprets the vision.

On the mountaintop, as Jesus stands there resplendent in all his glory, conversing with Moses and Elijah, Peter concludes that Jesus must be equal in majesty to these two great figures from salvation history. Moses symbolizes the Law, through which God instructed his people. Elijah symbolizes the Prophets, who spoke the word of God throughout history. And,

of course, Peter himself had proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, who was destined to fulfill both the Law and the Prophets. Here they are together, on a par. So, naturally, Peter thinks it appropriate to build three tents there, to stand as a memorial to the three of them. All peoples could then come and bask in their glory, as Peter, James and John were doing at that moment.

But, Peter has it all wrong. The voice from the cloud interrupts to proclaim Jesus as the *Divine Son*, beloved by the Father. Moses and Elijah are not there merely to *converse* with Jesus as equals, but to *testify* to him and pay homage to him. Moreover, the voice reminds Peter and the other disciples to *listen* to Jesus. Jesus has already revealed his destiny. He has already explained how he will enter into his glory — not by remaining transfigured on a mountaintop, but by suffering and dying, and then being raised up. Jesus told them this, but they didn't *listen to him*. Or, perhaps they listened but simply could not understand. Jesus reminds them again as he instructs them not to tell anyone about the vision "until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The fullness of Jesus' glory would be revealed not on the mount of Transfiguration, but on the hill of Calvary. The whole point of the Incarnation was for Christ to *renounce* the splendor of his divine glory in order to enter into the lowliness of human flesh. God the Son had lived in glory from the beginning of time, but in order to save sinful humanity, he obediently left that glory behind and became a *Son of Man*. In other words, to save us, he became one of us. In fact, he not only embraced *humanity* for our sake, he even accepted suffering and death in order to set us free. His desire was not to remain aloof on the mountaintop of glory, but to join us down in the valley of suffering, where we desperately needed him.

Many people see suffering and glory as opposites, but that's thinking as human beings do, not as God does. The Paschal Mystery reveals suffering and glory to be opposite sides of the same coin. Christ achieved his great victory through self-emptying sacrifice. God the Father saved the lives of all of his adopted children by handing over the life of his only begotten Son. Death and life, defeat and victory, suffering and redemption, sin and grace all merge together as one. The cross was not a temporary setback, which was then reversed by the resurrection. Rather, Christ's death on the cross was itself the means of our salvation. His resurrection, then, was the sign of the victory that he had already achieved by his death, and the sign that his sacrifice for our sake had been acceptable to the Father.

For us Christians, the crucifixion has become a type of transfiguration. When we look at a crucifix, we see more than the broken and pierced body of a man who was unjustly condemned; we see the light of salvation shining forth on the whole world. The cross has become another great epiphany, which manifests Christ's glory and proclaims his victory over sin and death. However, as St. Paul reminds his old traveling companion, Timothy, we must honor Christ's sacrifice by doing more than just pitching a tent and basking in his glory. We must also "bear our share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God." We unite our own passion narrative with his, thus allowing *our* sacrifice and *our* commitment to glorify him, as well.