

2nd Sunday of Lent 2010

In today's Gospel, we see once again the greatness of Jesus' compassion for his disciples who are in need. The transfiguration of Jesus takes place shortly before he makes his way to Jerusalem and the terrible and terrifying events of his passion and death. Of course, this course of events will not end in fruitless tragedy, but in the saving triumph of the resurrection, which is not simply Jesus' triumph, but that of the whole Church.

The connection of this event of Christ's transfiguration with His resurrection is hidden from the Apostles at this time, they do not understand his promise of the resurrection yet, and this hopeful connection will be even more shrouded in darkness during the shocking and scandalous events of Good Friday. Jesus had been gradually warning them about what was to happen to him in Jerusalem, but they were blind to it all, just as they could not grasp his promise of the resurrection. Nonetheless, Jesus knowing that his disciples would be deeply shaken by His passion and death, gave three of His chosen disciples this special gift of seeing him ahead of time in his divine glory, visibly witnessed to by Moses, representing the law, and by Elijah, representing all the prophets of Israel. He becomes surrounded by the cloud which appears in the great theophanies of the Old Testament, and he is finally praised by the voice of His Heavenly Father:

This is my chosen Son; listen to him.

This whole event is a great and compassionate gift to these Apostles who would be sustained by its memory through the horror of Good Friday until the glory of Easter Sunday; and through their witness, the transfiguration becomes a gift to the whole Church as this memory of the three Apostles sustains us as we pass through the trials of this life to the glory of the Life to come. The glory of his divinity, which this one time only was allowed to show through and transfigure the humanity of Jesus, is the same glory that will raise and permanently transform his body, and it will do the same for our lowly bodies at the end of time and make us His Heavenly companions forever. Thus just as the transfiguration of Christ sustained the faith and hope of the Apostles during His passion, death and burial, so its very recollection during Lent provides a beacon of hope that sustains our journey through this world with all its trials.

However, this gift is more than a beacon of hope that points us to the future reward of the just. The transfiguration is also a gift that can keep us from becoming too attached to this world, or as Paul said in today's second reading, becoming too set upon the things of this world, as if they were our God. If we believe, truly believe, that the glory the Apostles saw shine forth from Jesus' body not only reveals his divinity but is also going to be our glory, our future condition as well, surely this faith must make clear the vanity of this world, that is,

the passing nature of everything around us, and thus its inability to fulfill our deepest desire for an unending happiness.

A Christian who truly believes in the prospect of an eternal glory, promised in the transfiguration and in the resurrection of Jesus, is, as St. Paul says, fortified against this fatal temptation: "Their God is their stomach; their glory is in their 'shame.' Their minds are occupied with earthly things" as if their hope for true happiness is grounded in the things of this world.

The world is a real problem for us Christians. It would be simple if we simply thought the "world" is totally evil, and thus to be completely abandoned for the sake of what is good, which is found only in Heaven. That is the way certain philosophies and religions look at the world. They see it as evil, as something we must escape from if we are ever to find fulfillment and happiness. However, this is not compatible with Christian faith.

While there is much in the world that is evil, due to man's sinfulness, we know the world is not evil in itself, at least in the aspects of the world created by God. In so far as the world means that which God created, it is obviously good in itself, and yet the problem remains, for even the goodness of the world can become a temptation for us. The problem is not so much in the world, but in us, in our hearts, in our disordered souls. If the world attracts us away from God, if our hearts become too set upon the things of this world, as if

they were the purpose we exist for, then the world becomes a false god for us. However, the root problem of this idolatry is in our hearts.

Thus, the transfiguration is a great gift from God reminding us that the world is not our God, the source of our ultimate happiness, and therefore we should see that Lent is also a gift from God to remind us that world is a problem for our final happiness, a temptation that can lead us to disaster, only because there is a real disorder in the human soul. Each year, the Church reminds us with Lent that all is not well with us, and that we must discipline ourselves if we are to live in the world, without becoming too attached to the things of the world, even the good things of God's creation

Thus Christians do not attain their salvation and happiness by escaping from the world. Recall Jesus' prayer to the Father just before he suffers for us: *"I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one."* No, Christians attain their salvation by learning how to live in the world with pure hearts, that is, to live in the world and to make use of its goods without making them into their god, but using the world to glorify its Creator.

In fact, Christians believe that the goods of this world, when properly used, are true *blessings* from our God. Just as God gives us spiritual blessings, so also God gives us material blessings. All of these spiritual and material blessings are intended by God to lead us

to Heaven, to God. Indeed, it is very instructive for us that God has chosen to give us his greatest spiritual blessings precisely through the sacraments, sacred rites that make use of material elements from the world. Thus material blessings, water, oil, bread and wine, become the channels of the greatest spiritual gifts, God's life and all those spiritual graces that help us share His Life. Thus does God teach us, through His use of sacraments, the goodness of His creation, and the way it is intended to lead us to the infinitely greater goodness and happiness of God.

Think of Lent, then, as a *gift* from God and you are on your way to a proper understanding of how to live in this world, how to love the world God created, so that it remains always the blessing God intends it to be for us. Deny your appetites and your self-will during this season each year, and you will be happier in this world also, because it will be less and less a temptation, and more and more a blessing from God; and then it will help you find your true happiness in the world to come. Learn by Lent to hate this world in so far as it is a temptation, and you will be able to love this world in so far as it is a blessing and a gift from God. Keep your heart fixed on Heaven, and, paradoxically, you will never despise God's good earth.