

Homily 2021.02.28 Second Sunday of Lent (B)

The Gospel on this Second Sunday of Lent is always the Transfiguration of Jesus on the Mountain. Again, this year we have the account from St Mark's Gospel. Unlike last Sunday, however, Mark's account contains much the same details as the versions in Matthew and Luke.

Also on this Sunday the first reading is always taken from the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis. This year the selection made is the account of the test of Abraham and the near sacrifice of Isaac on the mountain. I have a visceral disgust for this reading. Years of safeguarding training properly make one sensitive and focussed on the needs of the child. In the Bible, everyone bangs on about how wonderful Abraham is. What the boy Isaac made of his trauma is not recorded.

Having acknowledged my problem with this reading I can now proceed to draw the connections with the Gospel. Firstly, in the near sacrifice of Isaac, the church has seen a prefiguring of the sacrifice of Jesus. And the Transfiguration is about preparing and strengthening Peter and James and John for what is to come in Jerusalem. As it is explained in today's preface to the Eucharistic Prayer:

“For after he had told the disciples of his coming Death,
on the holy mountain he manifested to them his glory,
to show, even by the testimony of the law and the prophets,
that the Passion leads to the glory of the Resurrection.”

Secondly, in the Abraham/Isaac story we see an early example of ‘the mountain’ as a holy place where God acts and speaks. Jesus is Transfigured on the mountain. And the two who appear with him also meet God on the mountain: Moses (symbolising the Law) receives the Ten Commandments on the mountain, Elijah (symbolising the Prophets) will hide in his cave on the mountain through earthquake wind and fire, until the still small voice of calm calls him forth.

In the second reading, Paul, writing the Romans, speaks of God's gift to us of his Son. The line ‘God did not spare his own Son’ puts us right back into father/son/sacrifice difficulties again. I will offer two reflections on this matter.

Firstly, Jesus is free to consent to the sacrifice; Isaac, it seems, is not. Twice Jesus is tempted to avoid it, in the wilderness and in the Garden of Gethsemane. Twice he chooses to continue. We must affirm both choices as being real and free choices, otherwise they degenerate into easy and cynical play-acting without any meaning.

Secondly, a challenge: having outlined my disgust at the Abraham/Isaac story, what is my reaction to the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ? Do I look at a crucifix and feel anything at all? Have I heard it all so often that I have become dulled to its scandal?

We expect comfort and consolation from Scripture and Liturgy. And sometimes challenge too. But for it to be truly real, truly living, sometimes it must upset us and disturb us. Our proclamation of Christ crucified will not be truly authentic unless we confront the shame and scandal of what we proclaim.