

Second Sunday of Lent

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Today's gospel describes an extraordinary moment in the earthly life of Jesus. There is no evidence that he ever spoke about it to his disciples in the way he must have spoken about his temptations in the desert. In fact, even though three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, witnessed what occurred on the mountain, Jesus strictly forbade them to speak of what they had seen. They are bound to have been puzzled by the occurrence on the mountain and they must have had to exercise great restraint in not describing it to other members of the Twelve. Of course, Jesus did not forbid them from discussing it among themselves. It was those same disciples who were with Jesus a few weeks later in the garden of Gethsemane. They witnessed their Master again at prayer, in dialogue with his heavenly Father, just as he had been on the mountain, but now instead of transfiguration he was in visible agony and distress. Prayer, however intense, did not necessarily transform immediately, at least not in a way that transformed physically.

The fact that the incident on the mountain occurs in the three synoptic gospels in almost identical versions suggests that it was a story well known and treasured too by the first Christian communities. Jesus suggested to Peter, James and John that what they saw would only make sense to them after he had risen from the dead. One can imagine that as the disciples proclaimed the primitive *kerygma* (the closest modern equivalent is a *tweet*), the kernel of the good news - "*Jesus/the Lord is risen*" - they also would have resorted to a "*I told you as much*" and related the story of the transfiguration. They had had a glimpse of the glory into which Jesus rose and in which he henceforth reigned on that mountain. It was for them a foretaste of heaven, a glimpse into what Jesus would be like when *fully alive*. And at the moment itself it gave them courage to continue the journey with Jesus, and one can imagine that their memory of the transfiguration was a straw they clutched on while witnessing Jesus in agony in the garden on the night before he was put to death.

The Church inserts this gospel narrative on the Second Sunday of Lent to provide us, ten days into our own Lenten pilgrimage, with a spiritual "*pick me up.*" It is worth sticking with Jesus and continuing the journey with him. The first Holy Week showed us how fragile, vulnerable and weak even his closest friends and associates were in the face of his passion. We have a great advantage over them: we know that the passion led to resurrection. Would we have been any stronger than Peter, James and John had we been with them in the first Holy Week? It sometimes helps, so as to test our own spiritual mettle, to imagine how we would have behaved if we were among those who stood on the side-lines of Jesus' passion. Does the transfiguration story which we read this weekend help us to cast our gaze beyond the apparent defeat of Calvary to the glory of resurrection beyond? The fact that the faith of Jesus' closest friends was so frequently put to the test, and the additional fact that only John (who in his gospel does not tell the story of the transfiguration of which he was witness) was with Jesus on Calvary, comes as comfort to us whose faith is so often subject to so much trial and stress. Let the story of the transfiguration be a shot in the arm for all of us as we accompany Jesus on the road to his passion and death.

Father Patrick