

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Leave Your Country

God's Call to Abraham is the first practical episode of the Redemption in the life of a single human being: Abraham, the first of us to be caught up into the story of salvation.

What Is "Your Country"?

What does God ask Abraham to leave behind - this "country" which is to lose a son to the calling of an unknown God? Genesis says: *The land was Haran*. Few of us have any personal knowledge of this Mesopotamian place. When God called, Abraham set out without asking any questions, with his childless wife, to go where God wanted him to go. This was the foundation-act of our faith, and Abraham is the father of all who believe. Where would the journey lead to?

"All Of These Died In Faith..."

...without receiving any of the things that had been promised." So says the letter to the Hebrews. The promise to Abraham was not limited to his own life; it was bound up with the life of his future children. Because Abraham *had* no children, this made his setting-out even more mysterious; but not by any means unique. Human beings have an amazing capacity to place their faith in things which seem unlikely or impossible to others. Genesis, the book of Beginnings, is filled with this sort of behaviour. The building of Noah's Ark is a good example. Everyone laughed at him, and went on with life regardless; and the Flood came and swept them and their lives away. Noah was right, and they were all not only wrong, but dead.

The Transfiguration

The story in our Gospel today is of a quite different sort. Why do you climb a mountain? To look at the view: to lose yourself a little, to see a larger view of the world. Three disciples follow Jesus up a mountain, and then at the top, expecting to look out onto the world, they found a totally unexpected, riveting, and inexplicable transformation in their leader which focused their attention unforgettably on him. What happened stopped any thought of the surrounding world, or memory of the world they left beneath them, the world of fishing and of fishing for people. Their response varies across the Gospels: in Luke they fall into a kind of swoon, self-forgetful, but still conscious of Jesus, and watching his meeting with the giant figures of their faith:

Moses the Lawgiver, Elijah the Prophet, who both also ascended the holy mountain to meet God. The vision is so overwhelming that Peter finds himself gibbering about looking for tents to enshrine it, as if they would stay there for ever. When they have experienced the imperious magnetism of transfigured humanity, the voice of the Father speaks to them: *This is my Son, the Beloved, who enjoys my favour: listen to him*. At this point the three visionaries hit the deck, paralysed with terror. Jesus came and touched them and said: *Stand up. Do not be afraid*.

A Sacramental Touch

This laying-on of hands breaks the disciples' enthralled state, and helps them to get up and go down to their fraught and stumbling lives once more. It is a compassionate hand that stirs them. Note that the words of Jesus here strongly resemble those on Easter morning, when they have to recover themselves, not from the sight of glory, but from the sight of the crucifixion. The Gospels here are psychologically very sound. Both grief and joy have the power to unhinge us, to disable our grasp on reality; and not only joy and grief, but the hopes and fears of joy and grief that we aren't actually feeling.

Did It Happen?

The ascent of the mountain, the meteoric suddenness of the vision, and its utter departure from the story (*Tell no-one until the Son of Man be risen from the dead*) incline me to think *historically* not. If the three disciples had seen this vision at this point in the story, I can't believe they'd have run away at his arrest in the garden. I see the careful assembly of the signs: the cloud that covers with shadow, and Moses, recall the Exodus, in this Gospel which presents Jesus as a new, but greater Moses; the mention of tents recalls the Tent of Meeting at the heart of the Temple; the mountain recalls Sinai, the Horeb where Elijah was given his vocation anew, when in despair he had prayed for death. I feel sure that this theological vision is a Resurrection moment, to give us our signpost in the Lenten desert. But the Son of God in human flesh, radiant with the favour of his Father, is the true terminus of Abraham's faith, and his glorified body is the land, and the blessed offspring, which God faithfully promised him. *Fr Philip*