

The Second Sunday of Lent 2008

Today's Gospel is a strategic element in the Church's Lenten pilgrimage. In this mountaintop scene we know for certain that our faith is not the result of intellectual argument or theological reasoning. These three fishermen are not being persuaded or explained-to. They are being overwhelmed with pure vision, realisation that robs them of word or thought.

It's amazing how many people - even quite distant from the Church - have grasped the fact that Catholics *give something up for Lent*. The word itself is surrounded by the feeling of privation, that same pinched feeling that also comes (mingled with post-festal tristitia) in the slightly sickened atmosphere of New Year: a good atmosphere indeed for the making of poor resolutions!

But the truth about Lent is almost exactly the opposite. It is not a time for giving up, but a time of receiving real gifts. The rarified air of the arduous mountain is the ideal place for vision; and the granting of this vision of the most beautiful and tremendous of all humanity is not a thing of deprivation, but of all blessings the highest.

The first factor about it is its fulness; the description is full of superlatives: the brightest of light: the most exalted of human attraction; but even this is thrown into relative darkness by the bright cloud, from which the love of the Father for his Son is proclaimed.

The second factor is its truth. This is no ordinary glimpse of an ordinary truth. They are being granted a window into the heart of the Trinity. Their own humanity has to be thrown into convulsion by such knowledge, and they remind us of those guards set to watch over the Holy Sepulchre: they are meant to keep the tomb a tomb, and instead they lie at the feet of the risen Christ like dead men.

The third factor is the presence of an almighty love. They have followed him up the mountain, as Moses and Elijah ascended Sinai in obedience to the calling of God; but whatever human love and loyalty they have experienced for Jesus is caught up in the revelation of his place in the love of the Father.

As I looked round yesterday evening at so many much-loved faces, I was reminded forcibly of my real sense that the communities I have served have been part of the communion of saints. I know you are deeply involved in many exciting and brightly-coloured earthly things, but I also know that we are in the company of saints this morning. There are those here who already clearly bear the marks of sanctity, and that is why the community is something more than a group of friends. On the high mountain, three men learned without any teaching that the man they had thought would help them to live their lives would be far greater than they had believed. They sensed, without understanding it, that he would help them to die their deaths also, and when he told them to *say nothing of the vision until the Son of Man should rise from the dead* they learned that he would guide them into eternal joy.

This is my Son, the beloved: he enjoys my favour: listen to him! To what must we listen? If we examine the placing of this story in Matthew's Gospel, we find it following on a sequence which for Peter is the most dramatic of his life. When he said *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!* Jesus greeted him with a beatitude, because he has received a revelation from the Father. Jesus then begins to tell them of the Cross, and Peter, confident in his status as one who has been blessed by God, dares to contradict the Saviour. At this Jesus says *Get behind me Satan! You are an obstacle in my path: you are thinking like a man, but not like God.* Clearly you can lose your hold on beatitude quite quickly. But surely the words of the Father, *Listen to Him!* refer precisely to Peter's inability to accept the Gospel of the Cross. The love of the Father for the Son is a begetting, a gift of total divine life. The response of the Son to the Father is a pouring-out of self in utter obedience. In his human life this will be

fulfilled in the sacrificial death which he is trying to communicate to them. The gift of Easter will only be given to those who listen to these tremendous words.

We aren't here to argue ourselves into good deeds, or to persuade ourselves to be decent human beings. We are here to be overwhelmed by the love of God, to allow our narrow and darkened life to die, and in its place to allow the wonder of the Resurrection to dawn in us. In this way we shall be prepared to hear him say to us, as he says to the three visionaries: *Arise....and do not be afraid!*