

C. D'Angelo+
St Thomas's Huron Street
9:30am/11:00am
Quinquagesima/Vestry Sunday
27 February 2022

“This is my Son, my Chosen: Listen to Him.” May I speak in the name of God:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

We gather today for the last Sunday before our forty day journey towards Easter, the journey of Lent, which begins this Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday, we will have ashes imposed on our foreheads with words spoken over us reminding us of our mortality: “Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.” And, on Ash Wednesday, each one of us will be invited to observe a ‘Holy Lent’ by taking up a variety of spiritual disciplines with greater intensity and intentionality than at any other time of the year, including self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and reading and meditating on the word of God. Before we get there, in the few days remaining, it is always worth taking some time to discern how you are being called to prepare to receive the gift and grace of Easter in a renewed way this year.

As we prepare for Lent, what we find in our readings today is a reminder of who we are as Christians: a reminder of our deepest identity, our dignity, the hidden glory which resides in each one of us, what our Lenten disciplines are aimed at helping to uncover and renew in us once again.

As St Paul describe in today’s epistle: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image

from one degree of glory to another.” What St Paul describes is how we are called to understand ourselves as image-bearers of Christ the ‘true Image’, created to reflect God’s truth, goodness and beauty within ourselves and through our way of living in the world. We know painfully that this ability to reflect the light and love of God has been tarnished in us, that it has been soiled and overlaid by dirt and grim meaning that we constantly stand in need of ‘mercy’ and forgiveness in order for this calling to be re-invigorated and restored. Yet, our Easter hope, is that, as proclaimed when we hear the Exsultet at the Easter Vigil, Christ by his death and resurrection “washes fault away, restores innocence, bring mourners joy, drives out hatred and fosters concord.” And so, we begin the journey to Easter again this year, looking to Christ, longing for healing, transformation and renewal.

As we do so, our Gospel today also challenges us on a number of levels, reminding us that the glory encountered in Christ is always beyond our full comprehension and grasp, often unsettling our settled assumptions about who God is, who we are and how we are being called to perceive and respond to the world around us.

After all, recall that by the time of the Transfiguration, the disciples had been with Jesus for some time. They had witnessed his ability to make the kingdom of God present on earth: they saw him heal and work miracles curing the sick and lame, opening the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind, casting out evil spirits, feeding the multitudes and calming the storm. And, all of this leads up to the section immediately before the Transfiguration, where Jesus explicitly asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter famously responds to the question by confessing that Jesus is God's Messiah, the one set apart to bring God's reign on earth. Peter recognizes Jesus as the one sent by God to deliver his people, to judge the nations for their wrongdoing and to establish God's everlasting kingdom of peace and righteousness.

Yet, what follows shows that he is a Messiah unlike any that could have been expected, that he fulfills the law and the prophets in a most unexpected way. Following Peter's confession, Jesus teaches that he, "...must be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised." And he goes on to say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

There is no 'Get behind me, Satan' scene in Luke's Gospel where Peter takes Jesus aside to reason with him about this talk about the cross and self-denial, as Peter does in Matthew and Mark. But, after witnessing Jesus triumph over sickness, evil spirits, the natural order and death, how could Peter and the others grasp that God's reign was meant to come through any other form than an impressive show of power? How could they expect that God's reign would come through Jesus' suffering and death inviting them to take up their cross in order to follow him into God's kingdom of righteousness and peace?

After all, what Jesus presents is a very different picture of how God's power is made known in the world than how God's power and glory is presented in the Bible as being revealed in earlier times, such as in the time of Moses or Elijah.

As Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt, the Lord parts the Red Sea so that the Israelites can pass through unharmed to the other side, returning the waters to their normal depth afterwards, drowning Pharaoh's army.

When it comes to Elijah, you might recall the story of Elijah triumphing over 450 prophets of Baal, a false god worshipped by Israel's King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Elijah, as the prophet of the one true God, enters into a contest with the prophets of Baal to see who worships the true God. They both set up sacrificial offerings and call upon their respective deities to send down fire. The prophets of Baal call upon their god and nothing happens. Elijah calls upon the true God and fire rains down from heaven consuming the offering and, in response, the people confess "The Lord indeed is God, the Lord indeed is God." And then Elijah instructs all of them to seize the prophets of Baal and Elijah the prophet kills all four hundred and fifty of them.

These events involving Moses and Elijah are 'glory stories' of the God of Israel intervening in the world to defend his people and put down and destroy their enemies, or the enemy within, in the case of those who bow down to false gods and forsake the one true God.

These are moments from the Old Testament when God's power is on full display and clear for all to see. Yet, now, at the moment of the Transfiguration, these figures from Israel's distant past who encountered God personally and through the interventions of God in history only partially, now encounter the glory of God in Christ face-to-face at the Transfiguration. And, they speak with Jesus about how God's power will be revealed in the

fullest possible way not through violent interventions in history, not in God violently slaughtering the enemies of his people, but through Jesus himself suffering, dying and rising again. The meaning of this meeting is that what came before in the history of God's people represented at the Transfiguration by these key figures, Moses and Elijah, is now brought to fruition, reaching maturity as Jesus travels to the Cross.

But with the revelation of this unexpected means of God's saving intervention in the affairs of history with power and might, we find Peter, James and John thrown into confusion and disarray.

Today, as the glory of Christ is revealed to them, interestingly enough according to St Luke's Gospel, we find Peter and his companions weighed down with sleep. Even though they were weighed down with sleep though, we are told that because they struggled to stay awake, or because they woke up in time, they were still able to witness the glory of Christ. Their struggle, we must recognize, is ours too. This is a perennial human struggle spoken about by Jesus insistently throughout the Gospels in such phrases as: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day when the Lord will come"; "Behold, watch and pray!"; "And I say to you, I say to all, watch!"; "So you also must be ready"; "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

After all, very often we find ourselves weighed down with sleep spiritually: when it comes to heavenly things we are often and easily lulled into a kind of indifference, insensitivity, lack of awareness, and so we have to struggle to stay awake so that we might witness the glory of Christ revealed to us by his Cross and Resurrection. We are always

upheld by divine grace, yet we must also co-operate with the inestimable gift of grace that is given. Weighed down by the cares and concerns of life, we have to struggle to overcome our insensitivity to the one truly, necessary thing that demands our attention: the deepest layer of reality, our Source and End, God himself who offers his divine life and love to us.

Keeping this example and warning of our mortality and frailty in mind, by the grace of God, may each one of us observe a Holy Lent so that we may keep the Paschal Feast with great joy this Easter.