

Lent 2c.19

Our Gospels for last Sunday and for today, quite appropriately for this Lenten season, focus on the Lord's attempts to fashion a future for himself in accordance with what he perceives to be the will of his Father, a will which will ask him to accept suffering and death. Last Sunday we saw him being tempted in the desert by Satan to pursue riches and power and self-aggrandizement. He rejects these and chooses instead to adhere to the love of God and trust in Him, and the suffering that this choice will entail. Today's Gospel of the Transfiguration has the same message. Here Jesus accepts his role as someone who will have to undergo pain and defeat and death.

Where, you might ask, is that hard message to be found in this Transfiguration scene? Is it not instead a scene of glory? Peter, James and John see Jesus being transformed into glory while he is praying, his face altered and his clothing becoming dazzling white. Where then in this scene is there pain and defeat and death? It is there first of all in the passages which introduce this Transfiguration scene. There Jesus predicts for the first time that he, the Son of Man, "must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed..."(9:22). Then there follows an instruction he gives to all who wish to be his

followers: “If anyone wishes to follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (9:23). The word daily is added by Luke to similar accounts of this instruction in the other Synoptic gospels to teach us that this is a daily program.

So that is the context in which the present scene is presented. But in the scene itself Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about his exodus that he is going to accomplish in Jerusalem. The word exodus recalls the flight of the Jews from Egypt and their forty years in the desert, but here it refers to the Lord’s death in Jerusalem. That is what he is now facing. Nor is he helped by his disciples at this moment. Peter wants to build three tents for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. So he is putting Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah, and that means he has not grasped Jesus’ unique role as the messiah. And Peter’s wish to build tents is also an attempt to make the present scene of glory permanent, which means that he does not understand that this glory can come only after the shame and suffering of the cross. And so this Gospel is teaching us that Jesus is here preparing for his exodus, that is, his suffering and death.

Since this scene also tells us to listen to him (“This is my chosen Son; listen to him”), must we not say that it is also telling us that

our own lives have to follow that of the Lord, that our lives, like his, must have an exodus, that is, suffering and death, before the final glory? We all accept that teaching as a common-place. We often say, "Into each life a little rain must fall." But here this common saying is endorsed by the Lord's teaching. And must it not also mean that we, as followers of the Lord, should be especially open to the sufferings of others?

The news today is of the slaughter of Muslims at prayer in New Zealand by an Australian man who wore a camera while he killed them so that his killing could be flashed to the world. The motive of his killing was to protect the white race from other races. May our sympathy and support reach out to those affected by his racism, Muslim men, women and children at prayer. For him they are non-whites because they do not originally come from Europe. For him white means essentially European, and perhaps those of us here in the USA who come from European stock.

Australia is a long way-away, but the white racism this man's horrendous action represents is not. It is here among us in our inability to get along as white and black. Indeed the horrible separation of children from their parents on our border with Mexico and the retaining of these children in prison conditions

which some call cages, like the cages people use now for their dogs, may at its root be another example of white racism, for those who seek entrance to our country there are mostly brown, not white.

As we make our way through Lent, and as we are confronted with a Jesus who is marching towards his own suffering and death, let us ask the Lord for two graces: strength and wisdom in dealing with our suffering, and sympathy and support for our neighbors in their sufferings, especially our neighbors whose suffering is caused by those who hate them because they are different from them in the color of their skin.