

2nd Sunday of Lent

Matthew, Mark and Luke all give us the story of the Transfiguration but only St Luke tells us that Our Lord was speaking with Elijah and Moses about his journey to Jerusalem and his Passion. The word he uses is 'Exodus' – an outward journey – something we think of both for Abraham leaving his homeland and Moses setting out from Egypt to the Promised Land. St Luke uses this journey to Jerusalem, to the cross and the Resurrection as the framework for his whole Gospel. On a journey we need landmarks and we all know the sense of elation, or perhaps of relief, when we first catch a glimpse of the place towards which we are heading, even if it still seems a long way off. I can think of seeing the dreaming spires of Oxford from the train when I went up for my interview before going to university, or later of the train journey to Rome, seeing the Italian countryside in the dawn light for the first time and later coming into Rome itself. In the Transfiguration Our Lord gives the disciples a glimpse of what lies at the end of the journey they have begun with him - a vision we too need to sustain our Christian faith.

Today's readings offer us not only a vision, but also a promise and a pledge. The Gospel gives us a vision, which the disciples of the Lord share with us. Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up a mountain to pray. They are tired, but what they see is so astonishing that they must keep their eyes wide open. Jesus is wreathed in light, his clothes shining with an unearthly brightness. They see two great figures of the Old Testament walking and talking with him, Moses, the giver of the Law, and Elijah, representing the prophets. Peter wants to prolong the vision, and offers to put up three tents, so that Moses and Elijah can stay on with Jesus. Instead, a cloud envelops them, and they hear the voice of the Father: "This is my Son, the chosen one, listen to him." Suddenly, they are alone with Jesus on the mountainside. Nothing will be quite the same again, although they will not realise the full meaning of what they have seen until Easter, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. What they have seen will help them through the traumatic events of Gethsemane, and Calvary, and enable them to recognise the risen Lord at Easter. Little by little things will fall into place for them.

Our second reading offers us a promise. St Paul writes to the Philippians, "For us, our homeland is in heaven, and from heaven comes the Saviour we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body." What Peter, James and John saw on Mount Tabor was a foretaste of the Risen Lord at Easter. Our Lord's promise is that we, too, shall be transfigured. All of us must pass through the gateway of death at the conclusion of our earthly pilgrimage. Our arrival marks not the end, but a new beginning. As Christians we do not believe in reincarnation, or some kind of purely spiritual survival of the disembodied soul. God made us with bodies. To be human is to be a being with a physical dimension. Our bodily nature and appearance is part of what we are. This is not a mistake, or trial run by the Creator. Although at death our body and soul will be separated, when God's purpose is brought to fulfilment in heaven, like the Risen Lord we shall be identifiable as who we are by our bodily appearance, even if it is subtly different.

Our first reading gives us a pledge. Abram asks how he can be sure that God will keep his promise, and God seals his promise by accepting Abram's sacrifice, and establishing a covenant with him and his descendants. God seals a new covenant with us in the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Just as Jesus dies, and rises to new life so will we. In case we should overlook its significance, Jesus says to us, "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me." Every Mass is a pledge and foretaste of Our Lord's gift of eternal life. When we share this vision, it helps to put the rest of life into perspective.