

2nd Sunday of Lent

God did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all--this phrase from the second reading today, from the Letter to the Romans, is the theme for this Second Sunday of Lent. What sort of father would hand over his own son to die for others? The first reading today, from the Book of Genesis, is the story of Abraham being will to kill his own son because he believed that God was asking that of him. Was Abraham wrong? Is it just a story? What does it say about God? All those kinds of questions are justified. Yet we also have to factor in the words of Jesus when he comes down the mountain and tells the disciples to keep the Transfiguration secret till he has risen from the dead. Jesus enters Jerusalem freely and in full knowledge of what will happen to him. He does so as an act of love – in St John’s Gospel he tells us that no man can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friend.

In Genesis Abraham demonstrates his faith. God has asked for this sacrifice but he has also promised that through Isaac he will have countless descendants. Abraham goes up the mountain in trust even though he does not know how God will reconcile these contradictions. God sees his faith and trust and provides a substitute – the ram caught in the thicket. When we come to the New Testament, how is God to save us from death, not just in the body but in the soul and for eternity? He comes down among us to accomplish this by taking on human flesh and freely choosing to share the human experience of death. The Father allows his precious Son to give his life out of love for us so that with him we may come through death into eternal life. He is like the ram substituted for Isaac. This is why John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is why Eucharistic Prayer I likens the sacrifice of Christ to that of Abraham our father in faith. This is the mystery St Paul spells out to the Romans. Christ Jesus not only dies for us, he rose from the dead and there at God’s right hand he stands and pleads for us. If God has not refused us the most precious gift of all, there is nothing within his power that he cannot give us.

For Jesus the Transfiguration was the turning point in his life. Until now all was onward and upward. He was captivating the people with his preaching and miracles. Now he must descend to the valley, to the road to Gethsemane and Calvary. In his human nature he is uplifted and strengthened by this experience of the Father’s love. For the apostles it was an awe-inspiring experience. They had never seen their master like this before. Peter, filled with consolation says, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. Let us erect three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” But it is not to be. This is only a preparation for things to come. With Jesus they must descend the mountain to the valley below and on to the garden of Gethsemane and Calvary.

The Transfiguration was the mountain-top experience of the apostles which prepared them for their future trials. The Mass is our mountain-top experience which prepares us for the trials of our day. The Mass is not a transfiguration but a transubstantiation, in which bread and wine are transformed through the sacrifice of the cross into the body and blood of the glorious Risen Jesus. In the joy and consolation of Communion we say with Peter, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” And we do not want to leave. But it is not to be. Soon we will hear the words, “Go forth the Mass is ended.” So we pick up our own cross and leave to face the trials of the day. But having been to the top of the mountain we know that “nothing can separate us from the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.”