

2nd Sunday of Lent (Year B) : Biblical mountains: horror & grandeur.

1st Reading: Genesis 22 (various): Abraham's test: to sacrifice his son?

2nd Reading: Romans 8:31-34: God is 'on our side'; who can act against us?

Gospel: Mark 9:1-9: Jesus' transfiguration, with a warning for the future.

This Sunday's 1st reading is a shocking Old Testament story: God tests Abraham's trust in Him by asking him to sacrifice his son & heir (Isaac) up a mountain. Our natural repugnance at this makes us forget that child sacrifice was common then. The Spanish conquistadores are often condemned for their trampling over the Aztec and Inca societies in Central & South America, but critics often forget that Aztecs & Incas practised human sacrifice on an industrial scale. The Genesis story mentions Abraham's horror at the very idea of killing his son; second, a heart-rending conversation between father & son; and third, God's wish that humans stop this sort of sacrifice. However, Abraham's native culture accepted child-sacrifice, so this would have been a natural 'test of loyalty' for anyone belonging to that world.

I think the Church has put this story in this weekend to link up with the 2nd Reading's piece from Romans. There, St Paul stresses God's love for us in "*giving up his own Son to benefit us all*". To Paul, this shows just how strongly God is 'on our side', and is why we should have confidence in his plans for our salvation – ours is a religion of mercy, not a wishing for human torment. God allowed Jesus to be tried, condemned & executed by the legal system used by Jews and Romans at that time, but it was not a case of God killing his Son as a punishment. The contrast with the tribal society in which Abraham (and the Incas & Aztecs) lived could not be stronger.

The gospel is about another experience up a hill – Jesus' Transfiguration, or appearance in glory, seen by James, John – and Peter, who gave Mark the details in Rome. The event occurred six days after Jesus had first warned his followers that he must suffer, die, then rise. He had also added that his disciples would have to deny themselves, take up their own crosses and follow him. Given the rip-roaring success (at a human level) of his ministry in Galilee – as we saw in the Sundays before Lent – this must have come as an awful shock to the disciples. Perhaps, even to Jesus, the full meaning of his Father's will was now becoming clear, causing him grief too. Many think that the Transfiguration was also meant to help Jesus' faith in his mission, at a human level.

What Peter, James & John received was a vision – the sort of religious experience we associate with Fatima, Lourdes, etc. For cynics, visions are just figments of imagination – people see what they want to see. On the other hand, St Mark is very honest in his portrayal of the disciples’ weaknesses and lack of faith, so I suggest this bit of the gospel is very credible also. The three disciples saw Jesus in a state of glory – with his clothes “*dazzlingly white*”. There appeared two great Old Testament people – Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the first great prophet) – both talking to Jesus. Of course, no-one had any idea what Moses and Elijah looked like, so Peter, James & John had this information by revelation. Far from any sense of triumph or ecstasy, St Mark says that they were frightened. Peter blurted out the daft suggestion that they build three tents (or shelters) for Jesus, Moses & Elijah. Just then, a voice came from a cloud: “*This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.*” Instantly, the vision ceased.

Of course, to Jews, the voice meant God Himself – hidden by the cloud, but still there. His words - like those at Jesus’ baptism, months earlier – show Jesus’ deep relationship with the Father. “The beloved” means ‘my only one’; ‘my chosen or precious one’: That was why they had to ‘listen’ to him. Even after all this, those three disciples were not much better than the other nine in trusting Jesus’ spiritual message fully. This was seen most sadly a couple of years later in Gethsemane: when the crisis came, most of them ran away.

What about us? We cannot go up a mountain to see Jesus transfigured. Those of us living in the countryside can go into our local hills, but anyone can spend a few moments alone, to think & pray. If we go into a Catholic church, we can meet Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. If you have a post-1970 missal, or a Bible, I do recommend that you use it for the Lenten readings, which are well-chosen. This Sunday, the first reading & gospel give a real sense of the ‘other’ – the ‘holy’ - coming into contact with humans. Few of us get that sense as deeply as those who saw that vision on the mountain of Transfiguration. I must admit that I do not get visions, but all of us can pause for a few moments in quiet, and think. The infinite Creator of the Universe became one of us in Jesus Christ, who gave three of his ordinary, rather clueless followers a real sense of glory up that mountain. It did not seem to do them much good at the time, but after Pentecost, it helped to make things clearer. Many of our experiences, religious or otherwise, can function in the same way: when we look back at them, we can see that some divine inspiration has been at work, even though, at the time, that was far from clear. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

