

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Lent (Year A) 5th March 2023

This is a very familiar story. As well as having its own feast in August, we always read this story on the Second Sunday of Lent. It is a sort of a miracle, but it is completely unlike the other miracles – the healings and the raisings from the dead, and the miraculous feedings. Jesus doesn't do anything; in fact he doesn't say anything either, until after it is all over. Something extraordinary happens, but it comes from God the Father, not from Jesus. He doesn't go up the mountain to be transfigured, he goes up the mountain to be alone with his friends. It is God the Father who chooses to give them this gift, this extraordinary gift, of catching a glimpse of the glory of Jesus Christ. This is not a reflected light (like the moon) this is a light that originates in Jesus himself (like the Sun). The three disciples are overcome. Peter is so carried away that he cries out 'It is wonderful for us to be here'. Before he even finishes speaking the Father's voice calls out 'This is my Son, the source of my delight'. It is a very moving exchange. In the intimacy and the privacy of a deserted mountain-top the true nature of Jesus is seen: it is wonderful and it is delightful.

This is a great gift for Peter, James and John. They obviously didn't keep it to themselves – if they had, the Gospel writers would not have known about it. It is, clearly, a story that they passed on to others. But what does it mean? What is the point of this story, other than just as a gift to these closest friends of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps we can find a clue in what comes before it, and what follows after it. Just a few days earlier, Jesus had asked his friends who they thought he was. Peter gets it right – you are the Christ. But then he spoils it all. Jesus tells them that he will have to suffer and die in Jerusalem, and Peter cannot accept it 'This must not happen!' Peter is not yet ready to hear this. After the Transfiguration Peter is with his disciples once again, and yet again he tells them that the time is coming when he will be handed over and killed, before rising again. The disciples, we are told, are 'greatly distressed'. That is hardly surprising – but there is no resistance this time, no refusal to accept it, no 'this must not happen to you'. Things have changed.

And what changes between the first prediction of death, which Peter resists, and the second, which he doesn't, is the Transfiguration. This encounter on the mountain top, where Jesus is wonderful and delightful to both God and Man, has helped Peter to move on. Jesus sees difficult times ahead, and to help his friends to stay true and faithful, to help them keep their heads above water in the stormy times, the Father has given them an experience which is wonderful (the fulness of wonder) and delightful (delight in all its richness). They will cope with the loss and the sadness and the fear, because the vision of the glory of Christ is so powerful that they know it will triumph in the end.

There is a saying of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal that perfectly describes what is happening here:

"In difficult times carry something beautiful in your heart".

That is what the Father gives the three closest friends, followers and students of Jesus Christ. He gives them something beautiful to carry in their heart through the very difficult times that lie ahead. And it has already started to work. Peter has, as a result of what happens on the mountain, dropped 'It must not happen to you'. The sight of the true glory, usually hidden, of Christ; the wonder of witnessing this, and the joy of being caught up in the Father's delight, these will be the beauty that help them in what is to come. But there is more, perhaps the tiny detail that tips the balance and makes them strong. The three of them are lying on the ground, overcome with fear. Their faces are covered, so they do not yet know that the vision has faded. And Jesus tells them not to be frightened, tells them to stand up, BUT before he says this, he touches them. There are three of them, so he can't just reach out his hands as he could for one or two, he will have to move from one to the next, gently laying his hand on each of them. This man who they love, this man whose glory has delighted them, overwhelmed them, remains still a man. He is not pure light, as he must have appeared for a moment, but flesh and blood. He is as he always was, and his touch gently given is, for them, a healing and a sign of friendship. They are delighted all over again, and they can go down the mountain as new men.

"In difficult times carry something beautiful in your heart".

It is a part of the role of the Church to offer to the world the beautiful things that we can carry in our hearts. As we come to Mass (even if it is poorly celebrated, or the homily is dull, or the music fails, or we cannot understand what is being said) we experience a moment of delight: God gives himself to us completely, without reserve, in spite of the fact that we do not in any way deserve it. Here he is, once again, here he is showing that humanity finds its real meaning in gift, in generosity, in life lived for the other. In times of loss and sadness there is the beautiful image of a wounded, battered but triumphant Christ emerging from the tomb. When we are alone, or family life is troubling or difficult, there is the image of the Holy Family that calls us in 'come to us, we are your family, we are the place where you belong'. Feeling vulnerable there is the touching image of Mary drawing her protective cloak all around the frightened souls who shelter there. For every difficult time, there is within the storehouse of the Church, something beautiful to hold onto.

"In difficult times carry something beautiful in your heart".