

February 20, 2011 - Second Sunday of Lent (A)

Readings for the Second Sunday of Lent (Cycle A):

1. Genesis 12.1-4a

Psalm 33.4-5, 18-19, 20, 22 Response: "Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you."

2. 2 Timothy 1.8b-10

3. Matthew 17.1-9

Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading

by Bill Hunt

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Each year on the second Sunday of Lent we listen to the story of the transfiguration. Liturgically, the gospel reading provides encouragement for our Lenten journey. In the first reading the Lord's promise encourages Abram to set out for an unknown land, and in the reading from the Letter to Timothy we are told: "Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God." So also, along with the same three disciples who witness Jesus' agony in the garden, we are granted a vision of Jesus glory to sustain our faith.

Many authors see the transfiguration as an encouraging preview of Jesus' resurrection following his prediction of his passion. The same three disciples who witness Jesus' agony in the garden are granted a vision of his glory to sustain their faith. (See, e.g., Fuller & Westberg 2006, 45.)

However, the transfiguration is better seen as a foretaste and pledge of the parousia, the final coming of God's reign in glory. This interpretation seems clear from 2 Peter 1.16-19 where the author, probably writing around the year 130 CE, cites the incident of the transfiguration "to support the veracity of the expected parousia of Christ." (Brown 1997, 764)

The words from the cloud are the key to the interpretation of the gospel reading: "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." As we examine this reading more carefully we ask: What reasons does Matthew give us for listening to Jesus in this passage? What are the words that we should listen to?

Why should we listen to the words of Jesus?

Throughout his Gospel, and especially in today's passage, Matthew portrays Jesus as a new Moses but even greater. We can see this in the changes that Matthew makes to Mark's narrative. For example, in his narration of the vision that occurred on "a high mountain" (Sinai?) Matthew reverses Mark's order and puts Moses before Elijah. More importantly, where Mark refers only to Jesus' dazzling white clothes, Matthew adds: "his face shone like the sun." This is clearly a reference to the skin of Moses' face, which shone after talking with God and receiving the commandments a second time. (See Ex 34.29-35.)

Further, Matthew paradoxically adds "bright" to the description of the cloud that "overshadowed" Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Matthew seems to have in mind the *Shkinah* that accompanied the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle during the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. (See, e.g., Exodus 33.7-10.) Finally, Matthew adds to Mark's the wording of the voice from the cloud ("This is my Son, the Beloved") the phrase "in whom I am well pleased." Davies and Allison observe that originally, this phrase "is from Isa 42.1, where it refers to the suffering servant of Deutero-Isaiah. Matthew appears to have added the phrase in order to signify Jesus as the one who is destined to bring his law to the nations. (Isa 42.4)" (1991, 686)

The two authors conclude: "[T]here is scarcely room for doubt that Matthew has modified Mark for the deliberate purpose of presenting Jesus after the manner of Moses. . . . Jesus is at the same time like Moses and greater than Moses." (Davies & Allison 1991, 686-687) This is the reason why we, along with Peter, James, and John, should "listen to him."

What words of Jesus should we listen to?

The verses in Matthew's Gospel immediately preceding this Sunday's passage read as follows: "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of the Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matthew 16.27-28 NRSV)

This was a problem for Matthew's church. Writing around the year 85 CE, there would have been few if any people left who had actually known Jesus. John J. Pilch estimates that in the world of Jesus' time 75 percent of the people died before their mid-twenties, only about ten percent "made it to their mid-forties, and perhaps as few as 3 percent to their sixties." (Pilch 1999, 145) Even a six-year-old child who was part of a crowd listening to Jesus would have been in his or her sixties by the time Matthew was writing. Second and third generation members of the emerging Christian Church wondered if they could rely on Jesus' word, given that he had not come in glory even though his contemporaries were about to die out.

Matthew's story of the transfiguration responds to this concern about the parousia by revealing Jesus' true identity as the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. It is part of the "already-now-but-not-yet" character of the Reign of God. In the transfiguration the Reign of God is already breaking in and Jesus has already appeared in glory to three of the bystanders. It is an eschatological foretaste of the reality of the parousia and signals the inauguration of the last days.

All this is reinforced by the presence of Elijah, who was expected to return in the last days. His presence in the vision reinforces the understanding of the transfigured Jesus as the apocalyptic Son of Man. Similarly, in the discussion between Jesus and his three disciples as they come down from the mountain, it becomes clear that Elijah (who was expected to return in the last days) has indeed come in the person of John the Baptist. (Matthew 17.9-13)

The vision of the transfiguration also confirms Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and resurrection (Matthew 16.21) as well as his promise that "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16.25b) The way to glory is through suffering. Matthew makes this clear in an elaborate literary diptych of the transfiguration and the crucifixion.

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Private epiphany
light glorification

	J	
M	e	E
	o	s
s	u	i
e	s	j
s		a
		h

The mountain
Jesus takes others with him.
Onlookers (three named male disciples)
Jesus is confessed as the Son of God.
Elijah was present.
“they were afraid”
Garments glisten.
“after six days”

THE CRUCIFIXION

Public spectacle
darkness humiliation

	J	
T	e	T
h	s	h
i	u	i
e	s	e
f		f

Elevation on the cross
Jesus is taken by others.
Onlookers (three named women disciples)
Jesus is confessed as the Son of God.
“let us see if Elijah will come”
“they were afraid”
Garments are torn and taken away.
“from the sixth hour there was darkness”

(Adapted from Davies & Allison 1991, 707.)

Meaning for us

We are not used to thinking of Lent in eschatological terms. Usually, our emphasis is on the past - remembering Jesus' passion and celebrating his resurrection. Matthew's transfiguration narrative reminds us that our Lenten journey is also a journey forward. Each time we celebrate Mass we proclaim the death of Jesus until he comes in glory and “we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.” In the transfiguration we have a vision of Jesus as the new Moses, and God instructs us to pay attention to his promise that we will see him in glory if we are willing to lose our life for his sake.

In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:

Brown 1997 - Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 761-772.

Davies & Allison 1991 – W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According To Saint Matthew, Vol. II [Chapters 8-18]*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Granfield, and G. N. Stanton, General Editors (London: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 684-709.

Fuller & Westberg 2006 – Reginald H. Fuller and Daniel Westberg, *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today*, Third Edition (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006), p.45.

Harrington 1991 - Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 1, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 253-256.

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 89.

NRSV = NRSV 1994 - New Revised Standard Version - Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, Editors, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible [with the Apocrypha] containing the Old and New Testaments*. New Revised Standard Version. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

Pilch 1995 - John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A.A* Liturgical Press Book (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 52-54.

Pilch 1999 – John J. Pilch, *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 144-146.

Senior 1998 - Donald Senior, *Matthew* , Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 195-198.