

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Lent - Cycle A
March 16, 2014

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, IL

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, every year on the second Sunday of Lent, the Church offers for us the story of the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mt. Tabor. At first glance, it might not be entirely clear why the Church gives such importance to this event during our Lenten journey. In fact, the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord is celebrated officially in the Church's calendar on August 6, so the question may arise as to why it is repeated here in Lent.

The short answer is that the custom of reading today's Gospel about the Transfiguration near the beginning of Lent may have come from the ancient tradition which held that the Transfiguration of Jesus took place forty days before Good Friday. But that only raises another question: why did the Transfiguration take place forty days before Christ's suffering and death?

To begin to answer that question, we can reflect briefly on how it is that we approach our reading of the Bible. In last week's Bible Briefings with the Bishop, I spoke about how the Sunday readings are connected to one another, particularly the first reading and the Gospel. Another helpful point to consider when looking at a passage is to examine what is happening immediately before and after a passage so as to better understand the context of that passage. In the case of our Gospel reading for today's Mass, understanding the context is essential to seeing why this passage is so appropriate at this point in Lent.

In the verses just prior to the account of the Transfiguration, Jesus shared with His disciples the first prediction of the Passion that He would undergo in Jerusalem.¹ This prediction was received with disbelief, as we hear in the reply of Peter as he rebukes Jesus, saying: "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you" (Matthew 16:22). This response indicates a weakness on the part of the disciples to understanding the path that would ultimately lead to the redemption. Aware of the weakness of His disciples, Jesus decides to take three of them to the top of Mt. Tabor to show them His glory. St. Thomas Aquinas comments that He did so "to strengthen the hearts of His disciples with a view to" His coming Passion.²

Pope St. Leo the Great, one of the Great Fathers of the Church and who is depicted in the third stained glass window on the north wall of our Cathedral, said in the fifth century that, "The great reason for this transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of His disciples, and to prevent the humiliation of His voluntary suffering from disturbing the faith of those who had witnessed the surpassing glory that lay concealed. With no less forethought He was also providing a firm foundation for the hope of holy Church. The whole body of Christ was to understand the kind of transformation that it would receive as his gift. The members of that body were to look forward to a share in that glory which first blazed out in Christ their head."³

The importance of the Transfiguration during Lent, then, is best understood when considered in the context of the Cross that lies ahead in the journey.

The event of the Transfiguration also offers to us an image of not only our Lenten journey, but of our entire lives while we are here on this earth. Life involves a series of ups and downs as we encounter various joys and sorrows. The Lord blesses us with times of peace and joy, times where we are especially mindful of His love and concern for us, His children. These

moments of joy help to serve as reference points of encouragement when we face times of difficulty and suffering, assisting us to not give up in the face of setbacks.

As with the disciples at the Transfiguration, the Cross is the central reference point for all of the events of our lives, both the good and the bad. There is a difference, though, in how we view this important symbol of our faith. For the disciples, the cross was a sign of scandal, a sign of failure. When confronted by it at the Passion, all but a select few fled. Even though the Lord had prepared them for His Passion, when they experienced it, it was too much for them, for they had not yet fully believed that the Cross would lead to the Resurrection.

We who now live in the time following the Lord's victory over death in the Resurrection have the privilege of seeing the Cross in a different light, no longer seeing it as a symbol of failure, but rather, as the symbol of victory. Instead of being a shameful reminder of death and defeat, it is a source of encouragement to us as we continue to journey toward the Resurrection. St. Paul summarizes this when he writes to the Corinthians: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).

After the Resurrection, the three disciples who went up on Mt. Tabor with Jesus would come to fully realize the connection of the Transfiguration with the Cross, and how the Cross would lead to the glory of God being fully manifested. Looking upon the Cross would be for them a reminder of that feeling of joy which prompted Peter to say: "Lord, it is good that we are here" (Matthew 17:4). Even when they would face the challenges of living the Christian faith, they could look to that symbol which once was a source of scandal, but had now become the image of hope and an assurance that they too would share in the victory of the glory of God which they experienced for but a brief moment on the top of that mountain.

During the season of Lent, we are invited to refocus our attention on the Cross, to see it as that sign of triumph. The gift of our faith helps us to see beyond the suffering depicted on the Cross and to focus on the glory of the Resurrection. In a very real way, looking upon the Cross serves the same purpose for us as the Transfiguration did for Peter, James, and John, to encourage us so as not to despair in our journey and persevere in following the often difficult path that leads to our participation in the Resurrection.

There is an interesting story which helps to highlight the importance of the Cross for us as a constant reminder to not lose hope. In 1953, a British expedition led by Sir John Hunt set out to do the impossible, climb to the summit of Mt. Everest, the tallest mountain in the world. Before setting out on the expedition, a Catholic priest sent a small crucifix to Hunt, along with a letter which read:

I would be deeply grateful if you would leave this little crucifix at the highest point your expedition reaches, if possible at the summit itself. It will, I am sure, give you added courage and determination to face all the difficulties and dangers which lie ahead of you; at the same time, it will be seen by many as a symbol of God's eventual triumph and the rededication of the world to his service.⁴

Colonel Hunt was moved by the request and gladly took the crucifix, passing it on to Sir Edmund Hillary who, upon reaching the summit, buried the crucifix at the top of the world.

The short letter of the priest who requested that the crucifix be placed at the summit of Mt. Everest expresses well the significance of the Cross as being a source of courage and determination, precisely because it is the symbol of Christ's triumph over suffering and death. This triumph is

guaranteed to each of us who embrace the Cross daily and follow the path marked out for us by the Lord.

As we continue our Lenten journey, let us take some time to ponder the great power of the Cross and all that it means to us as Christians. May it be for us what the Transfiguration was to the disciples, a source of strength to not give up as we face the difficulties of climbing the mountain of Christian perfection. May all of our joys and sorrows be seen in reference to the Cross, the symbol of victory and the promise to us that through it, we too will come to share in the glory of the Resurrection.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Matthew 16:21-23.

² ST III, Q. 45, Art. 3, ad. 3.

³ St. Leo the Great, Pope, *Sermo* 51, 3-4. 8: *PL* 54, 310-311. 313, quoted in *Liturgy of the Hours*, Office of Readings for the Second Sunday of Lent.

⁴ Haigh, Martin, "The Crucifix on Everest," *Reader's Digest Asia*, November 2008.