

February 18, 2007

LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

St Luke 9:28-36, Year C

Every year about this time, baseball players begin thinking about spring training. Soon athletes will be heading for the Sun Belt to begin conditioning their bodies for the long season ahead. This physical conditioning is serious business, because a player must be in top shape to make it through the whole season.

Conditioning was one of the purposes of the strange event of which we just heard in the Gospel, Jesus' "lighting up" while in prayer with his Father, transfiguration we call it. As with baseball players, conditioning of Jesus' prime players: Peter, James, and John was one of this event's purposes.

Conditioning them why? Well, let's recall when this strange event occurred: Jesus and his apostolic band are making their way to Jerusalem, following a pretty successful ministry in Galilee. **We know** what was going to happen in Jerusalem; the apostles did **not**. But immediately after his transfiguration, Jesus begins nattering on at them that he is going to be rejected and slain there by their own leaders, governmental and ecclesiastical.

You see, God the Father knew that his Son's followers were going to be completely up-ended, confused, and depressed, when Jesus was arrested and then humiliatingly executed. Their faith was going to be shaken to its roots. So the Father allowed his Son's inner circle to see who Jesus is, who he is connected to: the Father Almighty, the source of all power and uncreated light, to prepare them for what lay ahead. *Conditioning*.

During the moment of intimacy between Jesus and his Father, the moment of prayer, that energy which eternally passes back and forth between the Father and the Son, binding them together, radiated outward from the body of Jesus. The sight was further testimony to Peter, James, and John that Jesus was like no other, and surely came from God. And though they knew it not then, it was a foreshadowing of his resurrection, an anticipatory glimpse of the conquest of sin and death which he would win and which he would then make available to everyone in every generation.

Conditioning, spiritual conditioning – that was one purpose of this weird and wonderful moment for the apostolic three. And it worked. These key apostles were prepared to believe the impossible once they saw it. Thus on Resurrection Day, after an initial reaction of "Whoa! This can't be true!", they were able to recognize the risen Jesus and believe. Their affirmation helped their brothers to believe as well. And the then testimony of them all, a testimony incarnated not only in their lips but in the extraordinary transformation of their lives, enabled others to believe ... and others ... and others, even down to you and me.

But what of us ordinary folk? We need spiritual conditioning too. We doubt. We endure severe trials which shake our faith. Are we being cheated, God not giving us a glimpse of his glory or working some miracle to shore up our faith?

But wait a minute! It was only Peter, James, and John who received this weird gift, and only a few more who received a visitation of the newly-risen Jesus. For all the rest of us, ever since, faith has been built on and out of the testimony of those who have gone before us, the testimony of their lips and their lives, a testimony which should open our eyes to the undergirding presence of God in the very ordinary stuff of life.

For those of us who now live in the years of A.D. rather than B.C., the problem is not that we are not given glimpses of God's glory which can strengthen our faith. The problem is that we do not give attention to our life, so that the evidences of God's glory and his miraculous dealings with us have become like the background noise in a busy city like New York, noise which visitors may notice but to which its citizens are now oblivious.

And **there** is the solution to our problem of feeling bereft, thinking we have been deprived of testimonies to God which can shore us up in the struggles and daily wear and tear of life. The solution is: *paying attention*,

paying attention to God. Paying attention. In other words, prayer. If you are not a pray-er, do not expect to discern God's glory, to see his miracles, to feel his presence. If you have no discipline of giving to God in the days of your life your undivided attention, expect none of this.

But know this: growing in the awareness of God's glory, seeing his miracles, feeling his presence, does not require **success** in giving him *undivided* attention. What it requires is your willingness to give him time and attention and to keep at it, no matter how often your attention becomes distracted during that time and you have to keep battling back all those other things to which your mind and your spirit want to race. It is a matter simply of continuing to turn your eyes back towards God, no matter how many times they turn away.

That is what Peter, James, and John did. They would never have witnessed the glory of the Father permeating Jesus if they had not accepted Jesus' invitation to come apart with him. And when they had gone apart with him, they would not have witnessed the glory of the Father permeating Jesus if they had not focused their attention on him. And when they fell asleep as he continued in prayer, they would not have witnessed the glory of the Father permeating Jesus if, when they awakened, they had not looked round for Jesus, returning their attention to him.

But they *did do* these things: they **did** accept his invitation to come apart with him. And they **did** try to focus their attention on him, till tiredness won out, and took them into the land of dreams. And when they awakened from wherever in sleep they had wandered, they looked round to find Jesus again. And they saw it: the glory of God in human flesh. And so it can be with us.

A woman once came up to me at a series of lectures on experiencing God's presence which I had been asked to give to an assembly in California. She told me that in all her years she had never experienced God's presence, been aware of his addressing any words to her, giving her any direction.

I asked her, "How regular are you in adoring God Sunday by Sunday with your Christian family?" "I do pretty well," she told me, "I go to Mass about once or twice a month." "That's your first problem, sister," I responded. "How can you perceive God, if you don't obey his command to meet with him Sunday by Sunday in that action where he has promised to meet with you?"

My next question: "Do you have any special time of prayer in your personal life day by day?" "Oh," she replied, "I pray whenever I need God's help." "Second problem," I responded, "You're too self-centered. You only go to God when you need something; you're not giving him anything, yourself. You can't build or maintain friendships in that way, sister."

"So what would you suggest?" she asked. And, of course, those of you who have been here for some time could probably write out what I said: "Start by being faithful at Mass Sunday by Sunday. And establish a daily prayer life and try in your praying to shut up more than speaking up." Of course, over the next few days, I fleshed it all out for her, of what she should do in and with this time of prayer. I have no idea whether or not she did, for I've never seen or heard from her again.

But I do know this: from my own life and the lives of 2,000 years of Christians. Treat God as you treat your very best friends ... or someone you want for a friend. Give him your attention, faithfully. And you will come to see him and feel him in your everyday, and become more fit for the life he sends or allows to you day by day. Wouldn't that be - I almost said, *nice*. But after what I said to you about *nice* last week in my sermon, I shan't. No, that would be great!