

the Sunday Readings

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..... (*Matthew 0 : 00*)

2nd SUNDAY OF LENT

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*the radicalness of faith*¹

introduction

Forty years through the desert to the promised land; forty days in an inhospitable place before starting the task of proclaiming the reigning of GOD. The experience of the Israelites and Jesus are the framework for our Lenten exercise. Jesus is approaching his 'exodus' – his 'passover'. His death won't mark the end of his mission. We are to understand his death in light of his resurrection. That's what the so-called 'transfiguration' episode in today's gospel reading, invites us to do. Jesus transfigured – his face radiant and his clothes dazzling white – anticipates the Passover light. His death will not be the triumph of darkness! The power of death has been overcome.

first reading: Genesis 12: 1 – 4a²

[the call of Abram]

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.(1) I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.(2) I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."(3) So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.(4a)

The scribes of the royal court of Solomon announce the point of departure of Israelite history from general human history. The first eleven chapters of Genesis cover this general history. This general history is at a point where there is no future or direction for humankind in prospect. The opening chapters of Genesis are a statement about the barrenness of human history. Barrenness is a metaphor for hopelessness. Yet it is from the family of Abram (*Abraham*) and Sarai (*Sarah*), who find themselves within this general human story and who are also barren, that comes the LORD's promise of life (v.2).

An understanding of the Abram-Sarai story depends upon the vitality of the metaphor of barrenness. The story announces that a family begins to live the life-giving promises of the LORD. This family has the capacity to respond to the divine initiative where no such capacity existed before. The story marks an end of barrenness and hopelessness and begins a new history of blessing (v.3).³ It is the speech of the Holy God, that ends barrenness (v.1). The new history begins with a *spoken word* – it is a *word of promise* expressed as the abandonment of the old, barren, cursed place, in anticipation of being blessed with some place that is better. The gift of new fertile land and new life only make sense, if the One who speaks the promise has the power to make all things new!

Abram entered a new history. The new history begins with a call and a radical breaking away and departure from the old history. Abram and Sarai share the

¹Cover Image:

²The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

³[v.3] "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" – probably means, "shall bless themselves through you" (i.e., in giving a blessing they shall say, "May you be as blessed as Abraham") rather than the passive sense, "shall be blessed in you".

oppression, hopelessness and futility of others under the old history.⁴ Yet they are invited to leave secure barrenness of their old situation for the sake of a risky future in some other place which promises more! Abram and Sarai become as landless as Adam and Eve! The LORD spoke and Abram went and an alternative new history begins. The royal scribes attribute this beginning of a new history to the LORD GOD – who controls all newness. GOD's partnership with the Israelites begins with the pilgrimage of a minority group, who believe the LORD will do what is promised.⁵ The royal scribes view this new history as climaxing in the reign of king Solomon.

response: Psalm 33 : 4 – 5, 18 – 20, 22

[the greatness and goodness of God]

*For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.(4)
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.(5) . . .
Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those those who hope in his steadfast love,(18)
to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.(19)
Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.(20) . . .
Let your steadfast love, O LORD,
be upon us, even as we hope in you.(22)*

The psalmist speaks about a new world ordered by the LORD GOD's justice. The right response to such a world is confidence and praise to the One who can arrange all creation effortlessly for our ultimate happiness. The basis of the speaker's praise is the reliability of the world mirrors which mirrors GOD's own reliability.⁶

The Israelites live under the LORD GOD's watchful care. That care is especially attentive on behalf of the obedient ones (v.18).

The speaker's verdict about GOD and the world is that they are steadfast. The song moves from loyalty to an even deeper loyalty. Such loyalty is the basis of hope. The Israelites move beyond the fear that marks a response to an unreliable world. The substance of their hope is deliverance from real worldly danger (v.18) to protection in every dangerous situation (v.19).

The people can trust because they know GOD's name – the LORD GOD. The upright and righteous 'read' creation and discern in its good order the loyalty of the LORD. Thus they can live hope-filled lives. Not to be able 'to read creation' is to live hopelessly – that is – not knowing the real name of the Creator, and not being able to trust.

second reading: 2 Timothy 1 : 8 – 10

[encouraging words from the apostle]

⁴Gn. 11:30

⁵A pilgrimage is the opposite to an expulsion. The family of Abram leave behind the history of expulsion and they begin *the history of promise*.

⁶Creation isn't to be confused with the Creator. Creation is an important witness to the Creator for only a reliable Creator could have formed such a reliable creation.

Beloved child (Timothy), do not be ashamed, then of the testimony about our LORD or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of GOD,(8) who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,(9) but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.(10)

The writer is troubled by the Judaizers' demand for circumcision. He responds by reminding the community that the "*leaning on of hands*",⁷ is a gesture that implies publicly that in their community they are to act as the apostle Paul's doubles. After the rite, those who recognise the leadership of the apostle are required to obey the ones whose identity has been recognised by the whole assembly.⁸ The characteristics of those people who are in a ministerial role, in this community, to witness to Christ and share the hardships of an apostle (v.8).

Life and death, hardship and immortality, remain inextricably mixed in the present world. For the author, apostles and believers are to firmly face the struggles which arise from this. Jesus, before them, knew of such struggles. An authentic apprenticeship into the skills of faithful living in Jesus' way, is rendered impossible, if a teacher/preacher of the good news, does not accept her share of the hardship of an apostles' calling. Such is the authentic response of would be teachers/preachers, to GOD's saving activity and call to be holy (v.9).⁹

gospel reading: Matthew 17 : 1 – 9

[the transfiguration of the LORD]

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.(1) And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.(2) Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.(3) Then Peter said to Jesus, "LORD, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."(4)

The transfiguration account in Matthew puts Peter, James and John, 'on a mountain' (v.1)¹⁰ in a parallel to the early Israelite experience.¹¹ Jesus had been apprenticing his disciples.¹² His life had been thrown into turmoil. John had been handed over into the power of Herod and killed. His own ministry in Galilee had looked so promising, reaching its climax in the multiplication of loaves. The account

⁷Cf. 2 Tm.1:6

⁸This ministerial ordination was prior to – and larger than – what has come to be understood by priestly ordination.

⁹The temptation for would-be disciples and apostles is to replace this struggle and substitute a kind of magic ritual mentality! The life and teachings of Jesus offer the model of the skills for living faithfully. Imitation of these skills challenges disciples to faithful living in new circumstances of hopelessness.

¹⁰[v.1b] *A high mountain*: – probably no specific mountain was intended by the evangelist or by his source (Mk.9:1). Its meaning is theological rather than geographical, recalling the revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex.24:12-18) and to Elijah at the same place (1 K.19:8-18; Horeb = Sinai).

¹¹Cf. Dt.5:4

¹²Mt.16:24-28

begins with the words, "*Six days later . . .*" This links the account of the transfiguration with the first passion prediction.¹³ Jesus faced a choice: to lose or gain life. He is on the way out! He talks about his '*departing*' with Moses and Elijah (v.3). For disciples, the question is: "*How can GOD be present in such turmoil?*" Peter, James and John, don't understand.

Moses was the great liberator in Israel's history. He brought the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. Elijah was a great prophet, defender of the poor and the down-trodden when the Israelites again fell into slavery with social classes. It had been said, that *the messiah* would be *a second Moses*. And Elijah would come back to Earth to denounce injustices, preparing the way for *the messiah*. Luke's account has, ". . . , *they were speaking of his passing*".¹⁴ Luke is saying that they were talking about Jesus' '*departure*'. In Greek, departure is called, '*exodus*' and this is the word that Luke used. By saying this, Luke is saying also that with his death, Jesus is going to head '*a new exodus*', a new *departure* of his people towards freedom. In the Scriptures, GOD appears like *the GOD of Exodus*, which is like saying, '*the GOD of freedom*'. When Peter spoke to Jesus (v.4) it is about building some shelters, or tents, because the prophets had said that with *the messiah*, GOD would live again in a tent in the midst of the people, as in the first Exodus.¹⁵ Peter didn't know what he was saying – they could not stay there on the mountain.

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"(5) When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.(6) But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."(7) And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.(8) As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."(9)

They had themselves to begin their own '*exodus*' towards freedom. According to Matthew's account – a bright cloud covered them in shadow and a voice from the cloud announced: "*This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him*" (v.5). The cloud in the Scriptures is an image of GOD's presence. GOD accompanied the people in the shape of a cloud during the Exodus. In Sinai, GOD appeared surrounded by clouds. When the Temple in Jerusalem was established, it was said that GOD's presence filled the Temple like a mist. That's also the reason the gospels report that at Jesus' ascension, he was enveloped by cloud. The cloud is something

¹³*Ibid.*16:21ff

¹⁴See *Lk.9:30* – Moses and Elijah represent respectively law and prophecy in the Old Testament and are linked by Matthew. They now appear with Jesus as witnesses to the fulfillment of the law and the prophets taking place in the person of Jesus as he appears in glory.

¹⁵ 6. [v.4] Three dwellings here: The booths in which the Israelites lived during the feast of Tabernacles (cf *Jn.7:2*) were meant to recall their ancestors' dwelling in booths during the journey from Egypt to the promised land (*Lv.23:39-42*). The same Greek word, *skene*, here translated 'dwellings', is used in the LXX for the booths of that feast, and some have suggested that there is an allusion here to that liturgical custom.

visible and yet limits visibility. That is why it's an image of GOD, who is revealed to us and at the same time is hidden from us. Or, rather, it is revealed to us as mystery.

The voice from the cloud repeats the baptismal proclamation about Jesus,¹⁶ with the addition of the command "*listen to him*" (v.5b). The latter is a reference to Dt.18:15 in which the Israelites are commanded to listen to the prophet like Moses whom the LORD will raise up for them. The command to listen to Jesus is general, but in this context it probably applies particularly to the preceding predictions of his passion and resurrection,¹⁷ and of his coming.¹⁸ The passage says the disciples were enveloped by the mystery of GOD. Jesus is the WORD of GOD made flesh on earth. The message of GOD that we should love one another. That's the WORD that the cloud says we must hear. The disciples found out that Jesus was *the messiah* (vv.6-8). Afterwards he revealed to them that *the messiah* must suffer and die. It seems that Jesus makes them see that, through his death, he would have a glorious transformation.¹⁹

As they came down from the mountain Jesus ordered them to: "*Tell no one about this vision until the Son of man has risen from the dead*" (v.9). In his response to the disciples' question about the expected return of Elijah, Jesus interprets the mission of the Baptist as the fulfillment of that expectation. But that was not suspected by those who opposed and finally killed him and Jesus predicts a similar fate for himself. Events are forcing Jesus to make a decision. He prays about it. He comes to a decision. He has to confront Jerusalem with his message. The '*human one*' knows that the fate of the prophets awaits him at Jerusalem. It is a different fate to that expected of *the messiah*.

for sharing:²⁰

¹⁶Mt.3:17

¹⁷*Ibid.* 16:21

¹⁸*Ibid.* 16:27,28

¹⁹Matthew puts the whole story in a symbolic setting. The mountain talked about here, wouldn't be any mountain in Palestine. Most likely it was a familiar place, the pseudo-synagogue where Jesus was accustomed to apprentice his disciples (cf Mt.5:1 & 28:16) and retire for prayer (Mt.14.23). Matthew describes a new Sinai, where GOD, by means of a *new Moses (Jesus)* gives a *new Torah (Law)*; the law of love!

²⁰Lectio Divina: reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: '*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*'

- *Because of Abram and Sarai's faith in GOD's WORD of promise, fertility extends beyond them: Comment on Genesis 12 : 1 – 4*
- *As in Paul's communities, disciples today, must express the qualities of Jesus' life, to provide a live transmission of the tradition. Comment on 2 Timothy 1 : 8 – 10*
- *Along with Matthew's readers, we must come to terms with Jesus' 'departure' and the consequences of his absence, if we are to seriously assume our responsibility as his disciples. Comment on Matthew 17 : 1 – 9*

prayer:²¹

*Holy God,
 from the dazzling cloud
 you revealed Jesus in glory
 as your beloved Son.
 During these forty days
 enlighten your Church
 with the bright glory of your presence.
 Inspire us by your word
 and so transform us
 into the image of the risen Lord,
 who lives and reigns with you
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 holy and mighty God for ever and ever. Amen.*

review:²²

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²¹The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

²²The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.