

Homily: Second Sunday of Lent 2021

When I was a deacon, I spent a few months on placement in St Joseph's parish in Lancaster. Whilst I was there we had an evening on which we read the whole of Mark's Gospel, start to finish. Unexpectedly, I found it a very moving experience – there was a sense of journeying with Jesus from the beginning of His public life to the moment He rose from the dead. It was as though we got to know Him, saw Him go to His death, and then discovered the joy of the resurrection. It's something I'd like to do again here, when circumstances allow. But if you have a couple of hours to spare, you could try it at home. And if you do so, you'll discover that today's Gospel reading, the Transfiguration, occurs more or less at the midpoint of Mark's account. When he tells us that Jesus "led them up a high mountain", it's almost as though Jesus has been leading them, for as long as they've known Him, to this point at which His true glory is revealed. This is the 'high point', so to speak, of the earthly life of our Lord.

Last week we heard of Jesus alone, at the start of His ministry, being tempted in the desert. Today He takes Peter, James and John – His inner circle – to a place where they can be alone with Him. Later, He will again be alone with these same three disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, on the night of His arrest. They will fall asleep, while He prays. And perhaps to prepare them for that moment, Jesus shows these same three men who He really is: they get a glimpse of His glory. When we say the Creed in a few minutes, we will profess that Jesus is "God from God, Light from Light", and the Transfiguration is the visual sign of that truth.

It's also a promise of future glory for us. St Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, tells us that Christ "will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of His glorious Body" (3:21). In other words, what we see in today's Gospel is an image of Jesus, who is truly divine; Jesus, who rose from the dead in glory; and yet that image is also a sign of what we are to be when we become like Him in heaven. St Mark adds a little detail in his description: he says that Jesus' clothes "became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them." In other words, no power on earth can give this glory. It belongs to God alone, and only He can share it. Jesus, who "God from God, Light from Light", possesses this glory completely; but He also desires to share it with us. God promises us a glory that no earthly power can give. And this is not simply a promise for eternal life: it's also a reminder that God's grace, at work in us, can achieve so much more than our own nature or any earthly power can achieve in our lives.

Today's liturgy links this beautiful scene with the binding of Isaac, a crucial moment in the story of Abraham. At the Transfiguration, the Father's voice came from the cloud and calls Jesus, "My Son, the Beloved." And in the first reading, God calls Isaac Abraham's "only child", whom he loves. And – no doubt to Abraham's horror – God tells him that this son, his beloved, must be sacrificed. Isaac is a sign of Jesus, the only Son of God, the Beloved, the One who was sacrificed for us. Isaac, as we heard, is saved from death by God, but Jesus will endure this torment for our salvation. And there are many details in Isaac's story which point to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Unfortunately today we only hear some extracts, but if

we read the whole story (Genesis 22:1-18), we hear that, as they walked up the mountain, Isaac carried the wood on which he would be sacrificed, just as Jesus carried the wood of His own cross up the hill of Calvary. And there's a beautiful exchange in which Isaac, in all innocence, asks his father, "Where is the lamb to be sacrificed to God?" And Abraham, seeking to reassure his son, says to him, "My son, God Himself will provide the lamb." So it turned out in the story of Isaac – it was a ram, caught in a bush, which was sacrificed, and Isaac was saved. But the real meaning of Abraham's words is much greater: "God Himself will provide the lamb". God did provide the Lamb – the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus, the Beloved Son of God, who carried the wood of His cross up the hill of Calvary – He is the Lamb who was sacrificed. As St Paul says in today's second reading, "God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up to benefit us all." Isaac was saved – we are all saved – because God Himself provided the Lamb.

And so today we are given a strong image of the glory of Jesus – a glory that will be permanently revealed at the resurrection – but also a stark reminder that the cross must come first. The Transfiguration is a brief glimpse of the true glory of Jesus, a glory in which we ourselves will share, but first, we too must take our share of the cross. In all the sufferings we have in this life – in all our moments of tiredness, frustration, isolation, pain, worry, grief – let's walk with Jesus, carrying the cross with Him, allowing Him to lead us up the high mountain where we can be alone with Him. For whenever we unite our sufferings with His, He is leading us to the place where we too will be transfigured, and live in the light of His glory.

Fr Andrew

