

2nd Sunday of Lent (B)

25th February 2024

'Covenants on the Mountain: Signs of Hope'

Gen 22: Abraham goes to sacrifice Isaac Rom 8: *God did not spare His own Son*
Mk 9: 2–10: *There in their presence He was transfigured*

Last week it was **Noah** — the 1st Covenant; this week it is **Abraham** — the 2nd Covenant ... Both pointing forward to subsequent Covenants, such as that with **Moses**, and ultimately the New Covenant announced not just through another patriarch or prophet, but in **Jesus**, the Son of God Himself. Now, all the Covenants are divine signs of *hope* to mankind; and all of them, if you noticed, take place on mountains: Noah's Ark comes to rest after the Great Flood on **Mt Ararat**; Abraham's great test of faith, his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, takes place on **Mt Moriah**; Moses receives the Law and Commandments from God amidst dramatic thunder & lightning on **Mt Sinai**; and Jesus gives His life on **Mt Calvary** (prefiguring which, as we heard today, is His going to another high-up place traditionally thought to be **Mt Tabor** in Galilee).

Why so many mountains? (And these aren't the only ones ... think of Mt Carmel, Mt Zion, or the Mt of Olives; and of course who can forget that the Lord ascended the

hillside above Lake Galilee to deliver His *Sermon on the Mount*.) It seems that, in the Scriptures, it's a common feature that to *go up on to a mountain* is to draw closer to God, to seek some revelation from Him. And, I would add, especially in those mountain encounters which establish a Covenant, to find there a sign of real *hope*.

What is it like to go up into the mountains? To go *really high up* in the mountains — which I have occasionally done in the Lake District, England, and far higher still in Austria and in Italy — is to feel on the top of the world, close to God, giving one both a sense of exhilaration and awe at God's beautiful Creation, and also a sense that one can see the whole lie of the land, the panorama that permits one to see where one's come from, and where one's going. It is maybe no surprise that God drew His people up to mountain tops when He wished to speak to them in a new way, and reveal Himself to them; no wonder, likewise that Jesus would do the same for those key moments of revelation to His Apostles and other disciples.

But that doesn't mean to say that every time God takes us up on the mountain and speaks to mankind we immediately comprehend what He has to reveal to us ... sometimes it takes time for God's message to come to be understood. Abraham, called by God to ascend Mt Moriah with Isaac, was surely *not* comprehending God's challenging request to sacrifice his son. Abraham responded in faith to God's command — he 'passed the test,' as it were — and of course Isaac was eventually spared, God Himself providing the sacrificial offering instead. And when Peter, James and John are taken up on to Mt Tabor for the awesome spectacle of the Transfiguration, they too are not fully comprehending of what they are experiencing. Peter blurts out that they should build three booths, just to hold on to the extraordinary moment ... In his fear, he didn't know what to say. And when the apostles descend from the mountain they are still baffled by the Lord's words about "rising from the dead." Yet, Our Lord's Transfiguration was entirely for their benefit; He didn't perform that miraculous

gesture of shining with a luminosity of heavenly origin just for Himself ... Like all of Jesus's words and deeds, this act of Transfiguration was for us; in the first instance a special gift to the closest three apostles. It was to reveal to them *a glimpse of His divinity* ... Even if on many levels they were baffled by it, and daunted by it, yet they most certainly remembered it, and they most certainly needed it. In one of St Peter's letters, years later, he makes specific reference to this event: "*the Sublime Glory itself spoke to Him and said, 'This is My Son the Beloved; He enjoys My favour.'* We heard this ourselves, spoken from heaven, when we were with Him on the holy mountain" (2Pt 1).

The apostles' experience of Jesus, their coming to understand Him, was a gradual one. Our Lord revealed Himself to them little by little, for in a way it is always a *huge thing* to come to grasp the plan of God, the meaning of life in Christ, and all that God truly is. God is way beyond us, and yet He makes Himself as understandable as He can to us. Jesus's earthly persona shining with an unearthly light, which ordinarily would have scorched the

eyes of His countrymen, is given here as the briefest of reminders/pointers/assurances, that He is who He says He is; and that we can fully trust in that. In ch. 8 of Mk, Peter blurts out with clarity and faith that Jesus is the Son of the living God; in ch. 9, here at the Transfiguration, he's baffled and confused again; but he need not be: it's all right, He can trust. He can trust that that light he's seen shine out from Christ is in fact the reality, hidden beneath the garments of the Incarnation.

It would seem, then, that the Transfiguration, this awesome revelation to three of their number, Peter, James, & John, is all part of this preparing the Apostles to understand and make sense of what is to come. Jesus is giving them as much help as He possibly can. He's made it clear that He will suffer death at the hands of the authorities — which they probably could hardly have believed anyway — but the notion of Resurrection from the dead was *completely* beyond anything they would comprehend. The Transfiguration, therefore, is to help them 'see the light,' as it were. The Transfiguration is a

mini-Resurrection, isn't it? It's a glimpse of the irrepressible divine light that will 'burst the prison gates of death' when it comes to Easter Sunday. 5 weeks before Easter, today, the Church helps us to ponder the greatness of Christ's Easter victory by giving us this reminder ahead, this aid to comprehending who Jesus really is. Just as Our Lord was keen to help His companions understand, so He is keen for us to know, too, His majesty & His holiness as the Son of God. He wants our Lent to be *suffused with light* — it isn't meant to be a time of dark brooding and miserable penance, but a time of real attention to what matters. Our extra focus on prayer, fasting & almsgiving in Lent is meant to serve that happy purpose: to draw nearer, and to know better, the Lord Jesus. May our 2nd-Sunday reflection of the Transfiguration today truly 'light up' our Lent and make our hearts glow brightly and joyfully with His radiant glory.

In other words, whether our Lent is going well or not so well so far, no matter! We've got ourselves up to the top of this hill — we've got to this point in Lent — and the

space, and the silence, and the view is so worth it. Whether we're feeling fit and fine about Lent, or it's feeling a bit mediocre already, yet being up here on the holy mountain, we can see the way, and the way is towards glory. It is a way of *hope*. Like every one of the stages of Covenant — and like every stage of the self-revelation of Jesus to us — *every step is step of new hope*. How desperately those Apostles needed hope after Jesus had told them, “*Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man will come true.*” How sorely they needed hope in their Lent that extended from Galilee to Jerusalem, from Mt Tabor to Mt Calvary. And Jesus gives it to them, in searing abundance: as the light pours out from His being and fills their eyes, so grace pours out from His Sacred, compassionate, Heart and fills their hearts with hope. He knows they need it, and He knows that we need it too, this regular dose of hope, and Lent is a season to reflect that He gives it; He gives it often if our eyes are open to see it.

A final point on the Mass. One of the greatest

offerings you can make to Our Lord this, and any, Lent, is to come to Mass more often, weekdays, too. In the Mass our efforts at sacrifice and offering are joined onto, and taken up into, the most powerful offering and sacrifice of Jesus: this is the glory and wonder of the Mass. The Transfiguration of Jesus itself reminds us of the Mass. The Lord, whose glory was usually hidden from the disciples, was glimpsed there. In the Mass, too, we don't see the glory of Jesus, but only these outward signs, appearances of bread and wine ... And yet we can know, as surely as those disciples on the mountain came to know, that *God is surely here*: the body & blood of Jesus. The Mass is the summing up of Jesus's sacrifice and His glory in our own time and place. Jesus's sacrifice was to give His life on the Cross. He doesn't ask us to give our life on a Cross; but He can ask us to be with Him on the Cross, here, at Mass. As He is held aloft reverently at the consecration, imagine (see with your hearts) a Transfiguration: the divine, hope-filled light shining out from that hidden form of the Host, and pray with St Peter: *Lord, it is wonderful for us to be here.*