

Last Epiphany Year A 2020 SSP

Exodus 24:12-18; II Peter 1:16-21; St. Matthew 17:1-9

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

We have come to the last of the Sundays following the Epiphany. Lent is about to begin with Ash Wednesday this week, and then we have five Lenten Sundays before Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter. Holy Week and Easter focus our attention on the heart of the Gospel of Jesus, that is, his victory over sin and death through his own sacrificial death on Good Friday and his Resurrection from the dead on Easter.

The appointed Gospel for this last Sunday before Lent is always the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop as witnessed by the inner circle of his disciples, Peter, and the two brothers James and John. There is a three-year cycle of the story as told by Matthew (this year), Mark (next year) and Luke (the year after that). The evangelists agree on the facts although each also gives his own perspective.

There is a climb up a high mountain (though we're not told its name; tradition has Mount Tabor as the place). Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him. This takes place about a week after Jesus has predicted his death and resurrection. When he and they get to the top, Jesus is transfigured before the eyes of the three disciples. Jesus's clothes become dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah appear beside him in glory. Then, as Peter proposes to build tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." In fear the three disciples fell to the ground. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." And when they did, they saw no one except Jesus. When they went back down the

mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about the vision they had seen “until after the Son of man has been raised from the dead.”

The vision looks past Lent into Easter. It was a sight to comfort and strengthen the disciples when they tried to make sense of what would happen to Jesus. That inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John, had been privileged to accompany Jesus and see other wonders, like the raising of a young girl back to life. Now they were getting a preview of Jesus’s own Resurrection – not back into this life, but into eternal glory, after his voluntary death.

John, for example, in his Gospel, the Fourth Gospel after Matthew, Mark and Luke, reports Jesus saying that no one takes his life from him but he has power and authority from God to lay down his life. “I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again; this charge I have received from my Father.” This statement was illustrated when John, his brother James, and Peter witnessed Jesus’s Transfiguration on the mountain earlier on.

The Church wants us to keep all this in mind as we walk with Jesus through Lent, as we take note of his sacrifice. The Passion and the events of Holy Week upended and dismayed the disciples. They believed Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, but their understanding of his Messiahship did not grasp the central thing. Jesus repeatedly forecast his death. He saw the necessity of the collision between the love of God which he embodied and the sin of the world which he came to confront and overcome. He saw that his death was his mission, his life’s work, whereas the disciples thought it was a disaster. But then, after Jesus began appearing to them alive after his death and his empty tomb, they began to see that it was God’s providence and plan all along.

Today we’ll sing the hymn, “Alleluia! Sing to Jesus...” In that hymn there is a stanza which praises Jesus in these words, “Thou on earth, both Priest and Victim, in the Eucharistic

Feast.” What does it mean to say Jesus is both Priest and Victim? It means that Jesus presides over and offers the very things he undergoes in his suffering and death. The Passion is a breath-taking, heart-breaking thing. It is breath-taking because the Man of Sorrows is none other than Almighty God. It is heart-breaking because such grief is the price God pays in his love for sinners. But the Passion is not a tragedy; it is a victory. That, by the way, is why Dante calls his epic poem of Christ’s redemption *The (Divine) Comedy* and not *The Divine Tragedy*. It is a Comedy in the sense that it has joy and happiness as its ending, where, as the result of Jesus’s Victory, there is no more crying and sorrow and all tears are wiped away.

Priest and Victim. That is how we are to observe Lent. We see Jesus at the end, transfigured in Resurrection glory, with Moses and Elijah and all the saints, all who have loved the Lord’s appearing.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.