

HOMILY FOR LENTEN CHORAL MASS  
AT UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW FEBRUARY 28 2010

*I am sure I shall see the Lord's goodness  
In the land of the living.  
Hope in Him, hold firm and take heart  
Hope in the Lord!*

These words from Psalm 26 incorporated in the readings of today's mass of the Second Sunday of Lent, give us a hold on their message.

At first sight the readings are somewhat disparate; we have in the first reading from the book of Genesis a brief account of a profound spiritual experience of Abram, whom we recognise as our father in faith.

The second reading is from St Paul's letter to the Philippians wherein he encourages us to "be united in following (his) rule of life."

"For us," he says, "our homeland is in heaven," this is a gift far greater than that promised to Abram: "To your descendants I give this land from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River."

"From heaven comes the saviour we are waiting for," says St Paul, and it is on the mountain that Peter, James and John see him transfigured: "The aspect of His face was changed and his clothing became brilliant as lightning."

"For us," he says, "our homeland is in heaven ... remain faithful in the Lord."

The gospel passage recalls this extraordinary recorded in each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and referred to by St Peter in his second letter addressed to "all who treasure the same faith as ourselves."

One or other of these accounts from the synoptic gospels is read always on the Second Sunday of Lent. Peter says in his letter: "(God) has given us the guarantee of something very great and wonderful to come: through (his gifts) you will be able to share the divine nature and to escape corruption in a world that is sunk in vice."

In both the passage from Genesis and that from St Luke those who experience the lights of revelation of light do so "when the sun had set and darkness has fallen" (Genesis) and when "they went into the cloud" (Luke). The evidence of many mystics is that God's revelation comes in moments of darkness; indeed the transfiguration itself took place a week after another form of cloud had descended upon the apostles when Jesus had said to them: "The Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be put to death." Though, He added, "to

be raised up on the third day." (Luke 9,22) That last phrase, as the Apostles were later to explain to one another and to us, was not understood by them at the time.

The positioning of the record of the transfiguration at the beginning of our Lenten journey is as significant for us as the experience of the event was to the Apostles as they made their way to Jerusalem where their faith would be sorely tried and their hope almost entirely abandoned: "Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free," stated the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who encountered a fellow traveller not at first recognising Him as the risen Christ. (cf Luke 24:13-35)

When these two hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the Apostles of their experience, they found them gathered in the upper room, all but Thomas who said: "Unless I see the holes that the nails made in His hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, unless I can put my hand into his side I refuse to believe." (John: 20,25)

The truth is that it is easier to believe in the passion and death of Our Lord than in His resurrection. Death is, after all, an experience that comes sooner or later to all of us both in terms of our being witnesses to it, and of our experiencing it. We find it easier to believe the written accounts of Our Lord's passion, than the testimony of the same apostles to their experience of the risen Christ.

The fellow pilgrim on the road to Emmaus, upbraided the two whose company he joined: "You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets! Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into His glory? Then starting with Moses and going through all the prophets He explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about Himself." (Luke:24, 25-27)

We have an echo of this in the epistle of St Peter which I have already quoted: "It was not any cleverly invented myths that we were repeating when we brought you the knowledge of the power in the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we had seen His majesty for ourselves ... so we have confirmation of what was said in prophecies; and you will be right to depend on prophecy and take it as a lamp for lighting a way through the dark until the dawn comes and the morning star rises in your minds." (2 Peter: 1,19)

Last Sunday I had the joy of welcoming to St Mary's Calton, acting presently as our Cathedral, 120 candidates for the Easter sacraments. More than half for baptism, and the complement, already baptised, for reception into the Catholic Church.

While for them, Lent is a journey which will help deepen their faith and prepare them for their sacramental encounter with Christ at Easter, it is for all of us an opportunity to reflect on the progress we are making towards the

reality which is only partly hidden by the sacramental veil, and that is the presence of Christ:

St Thomas describes that semi-observed, semi-revealed reality beautifully in his Eucharistic hymn, *Adoro Te Devote*:

*Visus, tactus, gustus in te fallitur,  
Sed auditu solo tuto creditur.  
Credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius;  
Nil hoc verbo veritatis verius*

*Jesu, quem velatum nunc aspicio,  
Oro, fiat illud quod tam sitio:  
Ut te revelata cernens facie,  
Visu sim beatus tuæ gloriæ.*

One of the more poetic English translations puts it thus:

*Taste, and touch, and vision, to discern Thee fail;  
Faith, that comes by hearing, pierces through the veil.  
I believe whate'er the Son of God hath told;  
What the Truth hath spoken, that for truth I hold.*

*Jesu, whom now veiled, I by faith descry,  
What my soul doth thirst for, do not, Lord, deny,  
That thy face unveiled, I at last may see,  
With the blissful vision blest, my God, of Thee*

And so as we progress through Lent we strive to be ever more attentive to discern better the presence of Christ in our lives, not only in sacramental form but also in our brothers and sisters, especially the most needy – for Lent adds to prayer, almsgiving, care of the poor.

Pope Benedict develops this theme in his Lenten message for this year. He says very succinctly: "Conversion to Christ, believing in the Gospel, ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one's own need – and the needs of others ... the need of God's forgiveness and His friendship."

It truly is a journey, but it is also an encounter. St Paul says: "From heaven comes the Saviour we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of His glorious body." (cf Second Reading).

With the psalmist each one of us longs to say in reply:

*"I am sure I shall see the Lord's goodness  
In the land of the living.  
Hope in Him, hold firm and take heart  
Hope in the Lord!"*

Amen!