



From the Heart of the Pastor . . .

One of the joys of the pilgrimage I made last November to the Holy Land was to be able to visit the actual physical places which the Bible speaks about, especially in the life of Jesus. I have written before about “sacred geography,” how God’s story and the story of his people unfold in places like deserts and gardens, mountains and valleys, rivers and seas. Today’s Gospel, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, takes place on a mountain. (I got to celebrate Mass in a church built on that mountain) *For those alert to sacred geography, one would expect a transcendent experience of God when this mountain is mentioned and so it was.*

In the Old Testament, it was on a mountain that Moses encountered God in the burning bush (Exodus 3) and later Moses ascends Mt. Sinai to receive the Covenant of God’s love for God’s People (Exodus 31:18). It will also be on a mountain, at the end of his life, that Moses will see the Promised Land but not enter it. (Deuteronomy 34:1-6) It was on Mt. Zion, in Jerusalem, that Solomon built the Temple where sacrifices were made to God.

It was also on that Mountain of Transfiguration that God says about Jesus: “This is my Beloved Son! Listen to him.” Every day Orthodox Jews say the *Shema*; “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” taken from Deuteronomy 6:4. *The emphasis is on hearing God.* The Rule of St. Benedict, which has guided western monasticism for more than 1450 years, begins with the word “*listen*”: “Listen, O my son, to the master’s instructions, and incline the ear of your heart...” One of my favorite commentaries on the Rule of St. Benedict is by Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. She notes:

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“The very first word of the Rule is ‘listen.’ From the start the disciple’s goal is to hear keenly and sensitively that Word of God which is not only message but event and encounter. This is the start of a life-long process of learning, and the whole of the monastery is set out as a school of the Lord’s service, a place and a structure to encourage the dialogue of master and disciple, in which the ability to listen is fundamental.”

The New Testament is constantly showing disciples as those who listen to Jesus. One such story is that of Mary of Bethany. Jesus is visiting her and her sister Martha. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and is listening to him speak. “*To sit at the feet of someone*” is a phrase we still use today, and it is the posture of a student learning from a teacher (disciple literally means student, follower).

How do we listen to Jesus? God commands it, so how is it done 2000 years after he was born and lived among us? First, his words and teaching are recorded in Scripture. ***We need to study the Scripture, not just for information but to know the thoughts and heart of Jesus.*** There is a prayerful way of reading Scripture where we listen for the voice of God to speak in our hearts. St. Jerome, an early Church Scripture scholar, famously said: “*Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.*”

We also hear Christ speak to in the Liturgy of the Word in the Mass, as well as other sacramental celebrations. As the Catechism teaches: “*Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations...He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church.*” (CCC#1088)

The three disciples Jesus took with him up the Mountain of Transfiguration heard God speak in that event. Luke’s Gospel says that ***Jesus went up to the mountain to pray*** (See Luke 9:28). It was while in prayer that he was transfigured in the sight of these three disciples. It was in prayer that they heard God say those awesome words: “*This is my Beloved Son, listen to him.*”

The way we *most* experience God is in prayer, both liturgical and alone; we encounter God and receive his vision and are lifted up by his Presence. ***The mountain reminds us that we need to take time to go up the mountain to pray. It leads to transformation.***

Pope St. Leo the Great says that Jesus took the three disciples, Peter, James and John, up the mountain and was transfigured before them ***to strengthen*** the disciples for the suffering of the Cross by their being able to recall his glory prefigured in the Transfiguration. In other words, ***we cannot bear the Cross of Christ unless we are strengthened by his Resurrection***, and not a Resurrection just in the future, but even now like a “down payment” of *our* transfiguration.

When a parish has catechumens who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil, it may use the Readings of “Year A” for Lent. The Transfiguration story is told in Lent in Year A on the Second Sunday, of Lent, following the First Sunday account of the temptation in the desert. Lent reminds us that there are deserts in our lives where we are stripped of our usual comforts, where everything may seem dry and dying. But then we are told about the Mountain of Transfiguration to encourage us with a foretaste of the Resurrection and the glory of the Lord:

So, there is no desert, then, for the disciples of Christ without the mountain; no dying without the rising; no Cross without the promise of the Resurrection.

Yours in the Heart of Christ,

Fr. John