

Last Epiphany

The event we celebrate this morning is an odd one: it is an event that, unlike Christmas or Easter, doesn't involve a concrete act or have any physical impact on the natural plane; in fact it is more like a dramatized symbol than anything else, a symbol acted out in time and space, one that has no real effect beyond the message it conveys. And, it's not something that Jesus makes happen; it's something that happens to Jesus.

But the Transfiguration is a major event nonetheless.

It takes place, as Matthew carefully reminds us, very soon after the disciples – in the person of Peter – have recognized or acknowledged Jesus as the Christ. Here, on the high mountain, their 'confession' is confirmed, Jesus is revealed to them as the Christ who brings together in Himself the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) with God's blessing and approval. (And I think it important to point out that it was not the other way around – i.e. they were not led by any supernatural intervention to confess Christ, so what we have here is not a publicity stunt or bit of divine propaganda.) In a way, it marks the high point of Jesus's earthly career.

But its full meaning only can only be grasped when the whole story is told. And that's why, I think Jesus asks them not to talk about what they have just seen until He has been raised from the dead – i.e. until the story actually *does* end. Because until it does, they will not understand its meaning.

This is borne out by what actually happens in the gospel right after the Transfiguration. Remember that while it is taking place, the disciples are quite confused – Peter's remark makes that clear (and this is more clearly emphasized in Mark's version) – they don't know how to react, or what is expected of them. But right *after* this event the disciples begin to talk among themselves about who will sit at Jesus' right hand in the kingdom, that they begin to look forward with excitement to His reestablishing Israel and to the roles they will play in the new world order. In other words, they have reached their *own* conclusions as to the meaning of the Transfiguration before the full story has been told: and – guess what? - The conclusions they have reached are the wrong ones.

Because the disciples interpret the event it in terms of their own messianic expectations: they now believe that they are about to enter Jerusalem as retainers of the new David and reestablish the Kingdom of Israel. As it turns out, of course, they are indeed about to enter

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Jerusalem as retainers of the new David and reestablish the Kingdom of Israel. As it turns out, of course, they are indeed about to enter Jerusalem, and they do have a role to play in the establishment of a Kingdom: but it is *nothing* like what they have been expecting. The Transfiguration *does* confirm their confession of Jesus as the Christ, and this is doubtless something that will help them get through the dark days ahead. But, as we all know – and as they are about to discover – it is not so much the beginning of the end, as it is the end of the beginning. It marks the ‘wrapping up’ as it were of the Old Testament, and the inauguration of a New Age. All the strands of Israel’s history assemble on the high mountain: the Law Giver, the Prophet and the Son of David in the presence of an approving God: Israel’s task has been fulfilled; the Christ is come. And now, the fully authorized Son of David will descend from the mountain to claim His Kingdom, a Kingdom that is something far more than the disciples could possibly have dreamed of, a Kingdom that embraces not only Israel, but the world, and indeed, not only the world, but all of Creation. But this we can only know, the disciples could only know, beyond the Resurrection.

It is, then, important to remember, that the story of Jesus can only be made sense of in the light of the “end” – that is, in light of His Passion, Death and Resurrection. Any attempt to interpret His teaching, His miracles, or other events along the way, such as the Transfiguration, or even the Sermon on the Mount, except from that perspective, is bound to fail. There is only one way to enter the Faith, so to speak, and that is through Christ’s Passion, Death and Resurrection.

This is why, no doubt, the Church has, from the beginning, made such a “big deal” out of Holy Week, and the forty days of preparation, Lent, which precede it. It is to focus us on those events that hold the key to the understanding of the Gospel story, which in turn, is the key to understanding the nature of our very existence.

And so this week, on Wednesday, the Church, as it does every year, in the words of Joel the prophet, will “sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people”, so that together, we can retrace the steps of Our Lord through those final days that are the central events of human history, and along with Paul, “press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus”

Let us pray for a good and fruitful Lent for all of us.

SAINT:

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, 23 February. Honoured as one of the first Christian martyrs, Polycarp had been Bishop of Smyrna on the Adriatic coast of Asia Minor for over forty years when the persecution of Christians began. He was arrested and given the option to renounce his faith and so save his life. His response was: "I have been Christ's servant for eighty-six years and he has done me no harm. Can I now blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" He was immediately burnt at the stake. His remains were gathered together and buried outside the city; thus began the practice of celebrating the eucharist over his burial place on the anniversary of his death, a practice which also grew over the martyrs' tombs in the Roman catacombs. Polycarp died in the year 155.

THIS WEEK: February 22, Ash Wednesday.

Holy Eucharist & Imposition of ashes, 12:00 noon & 6:00 p.m.

The **Lenten Bible Study** series will begin the first week of Lent (Feb 27-March 4): The guidelines and points for reflection along with a recorded presentation will be sent to all parishioners. A chat group will be set up for any discussion. The series is based on Rowan Williams' 2003 book, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospels Unsettles Our Judgment*. You do not need to have the book to participate, but if you want a copy, it is available on Amazon Kindle for \$16 US. The other book I mentioned, *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis, is also available on Amazon for a range of prices.