

Second Sunday of Lent B - Faith, Hope, Love

February 25, 2024

The destination of our Lenten journey is clearly seen in this Sunday's readings: the mystery of the Cross, in which the father 'did not spare his own Son', and the glory which was to be the Risen Christ's in his final triumph, glimpsed on the mountain. The testing of Abraham is one of the masterpieces of the Old Testament. The story echoes a brutal age in which the sacrifice of children was not uncommon – in fact, the people of the old Israel were taught to sacrifice an animal in place of their offspring, to turn them away from this horrendous temptation. But the real point of the story, made so wonderfully, is the absolute trust that is asked of Abraham, making him the model of all true believers. God must be obeyed at all costs. To the people of Abraham's world there was nothing more important in life than descendants who would remember and honour them. Long after the age when he could expect a child, God gave Abraham a son. If he gives up Isaac, he has nothing left but his trust in God. That trust is rewarded – those who will call him their father will be countless; all the peoples of the earth will be blessed in his name – through the salvation brought by the Cross of Christ. This heart-rending story of the testing of a father's love is linked in today's liturgy with the basic truth of our Christian faith, proclaimed by St Paul, in the second reading. The eternal Father, who for our sake 'did not spare his own Son', will not refuse anything to his people in their need. The promise made to Abraham was to be fulfilled in the victory of the Saviour's resurrection. As he undertakes the journey towards the Cross and its glorious aftermath, he gives the chosen three among his followers a glimpse of the triumph in which he would fulfil the promise of the Law (Moses) and realize all the hopes of the prophets (Elijah). Again the Father's love shines through: 'This is my beloved Son – listen to him!' It was a long journey from Abraham's testing to the final fulfilment of God's promises. We are privileged that the route our journey must take is so clearly marked out for us.

This Sunday's readings present us with several figures from the Jewish tradition. In the first reading (Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18) we come upon Abraham, the Father of Faith and his son Isaac. In the Gospel (Mark 9:2-10) on the mountain of the Transfiguration we encounter Moses, the law-giver, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets discussing God's plan for his people with Jesus. This plan was to be a new and greater covenant, a new and greater relationship, greater even than the original relationship established with Abraham. The covenant is that if we trust in God, have faith, he will reward us for this faith. The first reading for this Sunday is the sacrifice of Isaac. This is a hard test for us to understand. The Jewish people never practiced human sacrifice. Why was Abraham called to kill Isaac? It appears only as a demonstration of how deep his faith in God needed to be. Well, as we know, he did have faith and his faith was rewarded by a covenant with him saying that his descendants would be as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore, they will conquer their enemies and all nations will bless Abraham. Like Abraham, we are called to journey into the unknown and respond to God's call, especially when circumstances make faith seem unreasonable and beyond our human way of thinking. At times of life and death, it is all important to keep on trusting God and take God at his word. Just as St. Paul said, (2 Cor; 5:7), 'we walk by faith and not by sight'.

I remember watching the BADLANDS PASSION PLAY in Drumheller, AB on July 22, 2012 with our friends in Calgary and my sister from Hong Kong who was on the way to visit Dad in a Toronto hospital. It was an epic story of faith, hope and love told on Canada's largest outdoor stage (6 acres of playing space in the spectacular Badlands Amphitheatre). Each summer, a group of actors, crew, and volunteers perform the story of the life of Christ. Everything was extremely reverential. It was four hours long, an experience of a life time. My Dad passed away a week later. But the show actually gave me faith, hope and love to face the loss. God is aware of our faith and hope. He knows the struggles we have to believe. Abraham did not want to sacrifice his son, but trusted in God. Jesus cried during the agony in the garden for his Father to free him from the terrible suffering he was going to endure, but he still trusted in God. How about us?

God sees us praying to him. He knows we want to grow closer to him. At the same time he sees how our faith is continually tested by the turmoil of our lives. It is easy for us to believe and be people of faith when all is going well and we are happy. It is easy to believe, be people of faith, when we are enjoying our family, our children, our lives. It's easy to believe, be people of faith, when we leave Church feeling warm and deeply moved. But faith is difficult when we are in turmoil. When relationships meant to be growing and nurturing, such as marriage, become bitter and end up destructive, when children push people to the edge, when jobs that we don't even like are in jeopardy, then faith is difficult. It is difficult to believe in God when we or a loved one is sick, or worse, when a loved one dies.

God knows how often we are just plain angry, angry with him for the difficulties of our lives. He knows that sometimes we become so angry that we even doubt his existence. He knows that sometimes we wonder if he really cares. God knows how often we feel weak in our faith, but he also knows that we do want to have faith. "I do believe," said the man whose son had epilepsy and whom the disciples could not cure. "I do believe," the man said, "but help my unbelief." God sees us as people of faith who are begging him to help us grow in faith.

When times of turmoil take over our lives, we have to focus in on the covenant with Abraham, the covenant of faith. Abraham trusted that God would find a way to reward him for his faith. And God did reward him. And he does reward us for our faith. When the disciples, Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transfigured on the Mountain and Elijah and Moses with him, they wanted to erect booths. They felt so overwhelmed by the experience that they did not want it to end. "It is good for us to be here," Peter exclaimed. We all feel the same way when we have a religious experience. We do not want it to end. But Jesus told the disciples and tells us that glory comes only after we understand what to rise from the dead means. We cannot fully celebrate the Glory of the Lord until we share in his passion, his death, his sacrifice. Our faith is tested like Abraham's faith and like Jesus' faith. We are called to give our best to the Lord and trust him to transform the sacrifice into a new covenant far greater than we could ever imagine. We are not meant to be spectators at the transfiguration but, like the apostles, we are to climb the mountain, reflect on its message, and live it out with conviction and sincerity. It is only through his passion and death that Christ came to the glory of the resurrection. The road we must journey is the one of suffering taken by Christ for it is only through our times of trial and suffering that we can experience the glory in store for us, provided we have faith and trust and never lose hope or stand in the way of God.

If God is for us, St. Paul tells the Romans and us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son for us, will prevent the forces of evil from attacking us. This includes forces within us tearing at our psyche, leading us away from the Lord. Overcoming our sins and weaknesses, and growing to maturity as human beings requires patience and is the work of a lifetime because nothing worthwhile is ever simple or straight-forward. God is for us. God is with us. May the faith of Abraham lead us to trust in God even in the most difficult situations.

Let this good old traditional hymn remind us of what faith of our Fathers can do for us:

Faith of our Fathers! faith and prayer Shall win all nations unto thee;
And through the truth that comes from God, Mankind shall then indeed be free.
Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death.

Faith of our Fathers! we will love Both friend and foe in all our strife:
And preach thee too as love knows how, By kindly deeds and virtuous life.
Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death.