

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

THE SOLEMNITY OF ST. JOSEPH

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DO YOU LIVE BY HOPE?

A reflection by Fr. Carroll StuhlmueLLer

All three of this Sunday's Bible readings proclaim hope. Hope is the major driving force of life. Those who lose hope, especially the sick, begin to fall apart. Hope is about the future, something beyond our vision and even our imagination. To live fully we have to live toward a future we believe in. Listen to St. Paul: *"I give no thought to what lies behind but push on toward what is ahead. My entire attention is on the finish line I am running toward, my thoughts are on the prize to which God calls me—life on high in Jesus Christ"*.

Abraham had to "hope against hope"; i.e., he had to hope for what ordinary wisdom named impossible. Then he had a visionary experience. A symbol of God passed between pairs of sacrificial animals used to "make a covenant"; i.e., here a promise only God could make come true. Some people hope only in ordinary pleasures. Isaiah quotes them; *"Eat, drink, and have fun for tomorrow we will die"*. Pleasure distract from a hopelessness that comes from not hoping in God.

We are invited to share a sacred meal God uses to promise something even more impossible than God did to Abraham. We see the promise in Jesus as transfigured. Jesus talks with the Law Giver Moses and the Prophet Elijah, those who proclaimed hope to Israel. Jesus transfigured radiates light. This is God's beauty and wonder beyond anything realized on earth but promised to us in Jesus. He is also dressed in impossibly pure white; i.e., that means he is utterly given to God. In the Bible "purity" of heart means putting all one's hopes in God. Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah about his "exodus", his complete gift of self on the Cross. We see what the Law and the Prophets—i.e., Scripture—teaches us about hoping in God no matter the price we have to pay to remain faithful.

We have our own symbolic version of the transfiguration when we celebrate the Eucharist! Jesus is present in his full reality as our hope and the promise that God will fulfill that hope for us just as God did for Jesus. At Eucharist we, so to speak, preach what we strive to live practically every day of the week and every hour of each of its days.

All of us will certainly suffer because of our hopes. We will have to fight through moments of discouragement and doubt and the fear they bring with them. We're like Abraham when he feels commanded to kill Isaac his son as a sacrifice to God. But Isaac is the living realization of his hope, a kind of beginning of God's fulfillment of that hope! Muslims have a story to the effect that Abraham's trust failed at the last minute and Isaac, already tied up and laid on the altar, spoke up to encourage his father to go ahead and trust God and do what God asked of him. Then God saves Isaac as he has helped save his own father. We need one another's help to follow Jesus to God. When we help each other hope in Jesus, and so in God, we bring salvation to one another. We do it in words, but especially in deeds. Let's show one another what trust really is.

THE COMMISSION OF THE TRANSFIGURED CHRIST

A reflection from a homily by St. Cyril of Alexandria

With three disciples Jesus climbed up a mountain and there he underwent a transfiguration. A wonderful light poured out of him; i.e., true teaching and genuine hope. Moses and Elijah stood near him and spoke with him about how he was to complete his earthly task by dying in Jerusalem. This is the fulfillment of the mystery of the Incarnation, of God becoming one with us in Jesus so as to bring us fully into the life eternal that is God's Kingdom.

We learn that the Law and the Prophets given us in Scripture speak to us of giving ourselves totally to God and doing it even if it costs us our life. The presence of Moses and Elijah and their conversation with Jesus tells us that there is utter harmony between the ancient Scriptures and the Gospels and that Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of all God's Scriptural promises. We are told, yet again, that to follow Christ is to "go out" of our ordinary life and "enter into" a new life shown us by Jesus.

Notice that Moses and Elijah didn't just appear and weren't silent. They were talking about fulfilling God's will by giving oneself wholly to God. What they had done Jesus did and what Jesus did we are called to do. Peter didn't realize this, as he hadn't when he tried to talk Jesus out of letting himself be killed. Peter wanted to keep what he already had in the experience of vision and hope. He didn't want to return to daily struggles. But when he said this the vision disappeared. He saw Jesus alone, just as we do, and had to go back to work.

How many of us would like to have everything ordinary go away and have only the Kingdom of God? Peter wanted what Paul imagined, that Christ would "*transform our lowly bodies into the likeness of his glorious body*". But that can only happen if we go with Jesus to Calvary.

The fulfillment can't be complete until God's plan is completed. Christ came to fulfill the basic reality that will lead to the plan's fulfillment—He came to die for us to show us how to die to all that isn't God or God's love. Jesus had to submit to death believing that this would bring about the salvation of the world. Then he could be raised from the death to destroy death and the old life, finally.

But the climax of the vision of Christ's transfigured self, as wonderful as that is, doesn't contain the full message. Something else occurred and served as a vital confirmation of Jesus' message to the disciples and to us. From a cloud came the voice of the Heavenly Father: "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased! Listen to Him!*"

What should we open ourselves to hear? Jesus says, "*Love one another as I have loved you!*" Help each other put all hope in God, as Jesus did. Love one another enough to give your very life into God's hands, doing God's complete will no matter what. Come down the mountain to those who need healing and in the power of faith and trust reach out to them and bring them to God, who alone can give them what they truly need. Let's lead one another to God! That's our call from God!

PREACHING BY DEED

A reflection by St. Pope John XXIII

Very often St. Joseph has been called the silent saint. That is because he never speaks in Scripture. What he does is work to fulfill God's will fully and exactly. If he thinks of calling off his marriage to Mary, it is because that seems God's will as stated in the Law of Moses. But then he is reminded in a dream that Mary is pregnant—or so she says—by the Holy Spirit. He is reminded he has to trust her faith and her honesty and so he changes his mind and dedicates the rest of his life to caring for her and Jesus.

It stirs me deeply to imagine Joseph's endless little deeds of caring for his family. Everything he does is seen as a way of fulfilling God's will for him, and for those he helps. Think of what this taught Jesus and how it affected what Scripture calls his growth in wisdom! This silent teaching will transform all we do daily if we follow it. We are shown what following God truly means and how much more there is to its meaning than the merely earthly results that work achieves. God chose to teach us this through Joseph.

Joseph also teaches a great lesson in serenity and trust. He had no more special revelations than any other person may have. He had to figure out what God was asking of him by carefully considering what he dreamed about. So, he accepted Mary into his home as his wife, then carried Jesus and Mary into Egypt and used his skills to earn a living for them there. He did it without complaint. When he dreamed the time had come to go back to Nazareth and start over once again, he did that without complaint. Whatever he concluded was God's will for him "now" he did generously and lovingly.

Most of us fear upsets in our lives. Joseph was ready to accept any change, no matter how unexpected it might be so long as he could see it as a way of doing God's will. A person of faith, as he shows us, doesn't hesitate in the face of fear and even uncertainty, let alone in the face of strangeness and situations never faced before. That is genuine trust in God. If God wants this or that then God can be trusted to show him how to use his skills and abilities to obey God and accomplish what God commands in spite of his limitations.

Thinking of all this we see how faith makes us humble and how we find confidence precisely through that humility. Joseph lived as a collaborator with God in carrying out God's Plan of Salvation. He didn't have to understand anything more than that God was asking him to do this or that.

We kneel in reverence before the hidden glory of Joseph's family. Before its very real treasures—things like the human virtues of humility, self-sacrifice, openness to learning and responsiveness in love, like acceptance of trials and sufferings and unquenchable trust in God, no matter what was asked. How many people need these riches even more than food and drink and better housing. Let's not forget we are asked by God to share these inner treasures along with those more ordinary ones. We are called to share them first by living them, by deeds more than by mere words.

BEING A MIRROR OF GOD'S LOVE

A reflection from St. Cyril of Alexandria's Commentary on John

The divine and its inexpressible glory and wonder can't be seen by bodily eyes, no matter how pure and unobstructed. As Scripture says, "No one can see my face and live"! The only-begotten Word of God had to become one of us and share our weakness by clothing himself in a human body and mind that we might see clearly the mysterious Plan of God's Providence, and so the Heavenly Father's will. Listen, then, to Jesus: "*I make known to you all that I have heard from the Father*" and "*The Father who sent me has told me what to say and how to speak*".

This Jesus is the one to whom the Father commands us to listen when he spoke on the Holy Mountain of Transfiguration. He spoke there to us, and he spoke to us through Moses and Elijah and Jesus. Think first of Moses as revealing God's will in a Law which has been summarized for us in the Book of Deuteronomy. God says to Moses, "*I will raise up for them a prophet like yourself, one of their own race, and I will put my words in his mouth and he will speak as I command and anyone who will not listen to the words spoken in my name I will punish*".

Between God and God's People there was a mediator, Moses. And between Moses and the People there was an interpreter, Elijah. It was the task of Moses, as of Elijah, to help people in their weakness grasp God's message and will and command so as to do them. We talk about this in terms of foreshadowing Christ, because he is the perfect mediator and interpreter to us of God's Plan and will. He communicated with a human voice the previously hidden will of God the Heavenly Father and the wisdom by which we can know how God will lead us, and all, to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Notice that the vision of the Transfigured Christ ended with a command by the Heavenly Father to listen to him, and certainly to obey him. To whom was this command addressed? Not just to three of Jesus' first disciples but to all those who would be close to Jesus and would mirror his words and deeds to others. We were there on the Holy Mountain and we have heard the Heavenly Father's command.

Now we are to live as mirrors of Jesus and his message just as were Peter, James and John. Moses and then Elijah are icons of the reality of God Incarnate, Jesus the Christ. He is the perfect image of the Heavenly Father. But he wills that we be mirrors of him to our own neighbors and times. Christ faithfully communicated to the People the divine decrees. He is the culmination of a long series of mirrors of God's will and words and we are to continue that series. In Christ the teachings of the Law and of the Prophets reached its consummation. Christ is their fulfillment. Now we are to continue to present Jesus, not simply in words but in our deeds and lives. His commandment was to love one another as he has loved us. He loved us in showing us the Father. We are to love one another in showing each other Christ. Greater love than this no one has than to lay down one's life in imitation of Christ's love.

TRAINING THE EYES OF FAITH

A reflection from a baptismal catechesis of St. John Chrysostom

We have such a life-giving source of spiritual understanding, like a table laden with a thousand good things and spiritual gifts, let us approach it with both a sincere heart and clear conscience using the help of those who have gone before us on the way of faith. They can help us open ourselves to receive grace and mercy in time of special need. It is possible through the only Son of God, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

You have heard about the great wonders and miracles that God did for the Jewish people whom he first called to hear his word and walk in his ways. Think of all they saw as they left Egypt. The army of Pharaoh was drowned and the Jews passed through the sea as on dry land. I have pointed out to you that you have seen the destruction of a greater than Pharaoh, the devil, and that you have passed through death itself, a much greater thing than passing through the sea. What is important here is that you learn to see the parallels between the way our God deals with us and the way he dealt with the first people he called, the Jews. That is how you open the eyes of faith so faith can help you meet the challenges posed by your efforts to answer God's call and carry out God's commands.

God led Israel out of slavery into freedom. Isn't being trapped in sinful habits a worse kind of slavery than what we ordinarily call by that name? In both instances one isn't able to do what will bring good and a good life because one is not free. What can free you from sin? You have to learn to love God as your Savior in a way that frees you from receiving the kind of supposedly good thing that held you enslaved. But the key here is seeing yourself as needing to be freed and wanting that very badly—more than you want whatever your sin was. Perhaps what you need is to grasp God's love for you.

Now view this situation from the perspective a parallel between Moses and Jesus. When Moses spoke with God his face was transfigured so it glowed. Seeing Moses' face, his fellow Israelites saw how God's presence can transform a person and make that person awesome and a little frightening. But Jesus has shown himself to us as transfigured on the mountain and let us see how wonderful it can be to draw close to God. Is that enough to show us that even more is given through holiness than we could ever gain on our own through sin? The more truly you see the parallels between your life and that of God's holy ones the more powerful the grace of Christ will work in you to free you from sin.

Moses struck a rock and water gushed forth. Jesus strikes the rock of our altar and causes the Spirit to gush forth and fill our hearts. The birds of the air gathered to the spring God opened for Moses; endless people gather around us to share Spirit's gifts shown in us. Endless parallels show us how God works with and in us in every sort of circumstance. Your faith can open the eyes of your spirit to see such parallels. You want most to see those that parallel things you experience or have to do in order to be faithful to your own baptism and its promises. When you see these things, you appreciate that God is always with you and helping you. What could better give us strength?

PUTTING AWAY OLD THINGS DURING LENT

A reflection from The Life of Moses by St. Gregory of Nyssa

After the Israelites had crossed the sea, after the undrinkable water they encountered had been made drinkable, after enjoying rest among palm trees and springs, finally all the supplies the People had brought from Egypt gave out. They had none of the “old food” and had to turn to God to receive the manna that they were to eat until they entered the land of God’s promise.

The lesson this story teaches is that we must purge ourselves of everything associated with the “Egyptian Way” of life that was once ours, so that we may begin a genuinely new life by walking a “Christian Way”. You can compare your own heart and mind and soul to a kind of sack containing all sorts of things you once used to make yourself feel good or satisfied. You have to empty all this out so that you may receive into yourself, into your innermost being, the food that comes down from heaven.

No seed harvested from the earth or grown in the earth can enable us to live the Christian Life strongly and perseveringly. We have here a parallel between what the Israelites experienced of old and what we Christians experience now.

We must keep it in mind, moreover, that the new food that comes down from heaven for us is not an unsubstantial thing. As for the Israelites, what feeds us, like the manna, isn’t grown from the earth, though it may be found on earth. You will not find the nourishment you need to live in a Christian Way by tilling the earth, even though you will find it in on earth. This parallel reminds us not to look to ordinary sources to get what we need to live our new life. We must let go of the old and then turn to the Lord who alone gives what we genuinely need.

We don’t live by ordinary bread alone, but by the Words that come forth from the mouth of the Most High. This bread may seem common and unappetizing to us if we look at it wrongly, but if seen by the eyes of faith it will have exactly the taste a given person needs if that person is to be satisfied. The Wisdom of Solomon tell us this. Whatever reminds us of God’s care for us gives us spiritual nourishment and enables us to live out the love God pours into our hearts through the Spirit. It is this which satisfies. We no longer need one or the other particular food, as we did in Egypt. Whatever God gives us satisfies us because it fills us with knowledge that we are loved and treasured.

This is approximately what St. Paul says to us. His teaching was so adapted to the hearers that it nourished the spirits of all. He so adapted his words as to give meat to the more advanced and vegetables to the less advanced, and milk to the those who were but first beginners. But to receive this food you have to put away everything that you may have brought with you from your old life, from Egypt. God never failed Israel and he will never fail you. You have Christ’s word. Let the eyes of faith guide you so you never return to Egypt because you find something lacking. Of course, you lack what could not bring you to God. Rejoice and trust in the Lord. Isn’t this a season of purification? Aren’t we prepared to suffer any sort of hardship to draw closer to Christ? Adapting to the new diet will bring difficulties but that is a sign of your progress.

KNOWING GOD IN A DARKNESS LIKE LOVE

A reflection from The Life of Moses by St. Gregory of Nyssa

Moses entered into the darkness and there he saw God. What are we to make of this? This declaration seems to contradict the other clear declaration that God appears in light. How can he appear in light and in darkness?

The first thing to keep in mind is that this twin declaration matches a normal experience of spiritual contemplation. Religious knowledge is first experienced as light. That isn't because we actually see light in itself but because what we understand makes much seem clear that was before obscure.

Whatever is opposed to faith and religion is grasped, by one who has seen using what we call light, is grasped as though it were darkness. When it vanishes, we say that darkness has vanished. Yet, the more one advances and attains a kind of comprehension of spiritual realities, the more clearly one sees that the divine nature is not the kind of reality that can in any way be seen, not in the proper sense of "seen".

God is by nature invisible. That means there are no appearances involved in "knowing God". One who would contemplate God must leave sense appearances behind, and in fact such a one must leave all intellectual appearances behind as well. We can no more conceive of God with our intellect than we can see God with our eyes.

What we discover is that when we penetrate deeply enough into ourselves by a kind of spiritual effort, we come to the invisible and unknowable God. Then we say that we "see" God. But we have to be careful to be clear here about what is meant.

The true "knowledge" and the true "vision" of the God we seek lies first in "seeing" that God is invisible. God's incomprehensibility is like darkness and grasping this fact is like "seeing" darkness. One sees that God is separated from all other things in his proper reality. One sees this in what one might call a luminous darkness.

Let me use a metaphor. All of us can know love. We say that God is love. Yet love itself is not seeable. When we know love what we do is experience loving. When we are filled with loving and let that mold all we do and are then we are said to know love.

When God comes to us and fills us God transforms us and makes us divine. This divinity is known as love is known, as we know God is love. God is active like a flaming fire and the fire changes us from within and makes us act as Jesus did and does. When we do, and so experience, divine life within us in this way, we "know" God.

When Moses had advance in knowledge, he declared that he saw God in darkness or, in other words, that he recognized that God is essentially that which transcends all ordinary knowledge and which no mind can comprehend. "*Moses entered into the darkness where God was*", the text says. He entered into God's love and was initiated into the divine mysteries. That is God's call to us.