

HOMILY - TRANSFIGURATION - LENT SUNDAY 2-A (Homily 02)

“Invitation to Suffer”

(Genesis 12:1-4; Psalm 33; 2 Timothy 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9)

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Towards the end of 2010, the Canadian bishops received an invitation to travel to the Holy Land. One of the new movements in the Church, the Neocatechumenate Way, was making the offer and would even provide a ticket for those bishops from poorer dioceses. At least ten Canadian bishops took up the offer.

The readings today offer us an even more important, though challenging, invitation. St. Paul invites us to join with him in *suffering for the sake of the gospel*. That is the invitation – redemptive suffering. Not quite as attractive as a trip to the Holy Land, but even more meaningful. Do we have the faith to respond?

How fitting that the first reading is all about faith. Abraham had the faith set out on a journey into the unknown, even though he knew little of what that journey would entail. He would actually be shown the destination on the way. Abraham had the strong, trusting faith in the providence of God that made him our ancestor in faith.

The invitation from St. Paul invites us also to a journey of faith. St. Paul met Jesus in person, on the road to Damascus. Paul, who was persecuting the followers of Jesus, experienced the compassion, the forgiveness, the acceptance of Jesus. The one he thought was dead appeared to him, spoke to him and forgave him. Jesus invited Paul to believe in him, and to follow him in suffering for the sake of the Gospel. That encounter transformed him from Saul to Paul, and eventually empowered him to, like Jesus, give his life for the sake of the Gospel. St. Paul’s encounter with Jesus the Risen Lord led him to a new way of life, a life of strong faith that was willing to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

The transfiguration of Jesus in the Gospel links with Paul’s invitation. The purpose of that scintillating theophany was to take away the scandal of the cross, to prepare the disciples for how God works best in our lives through some suffering. In the midst of all that glory, brightness and exhilaration which Peter wanted to possess, Moses and Elijah appeared speaking to Jesus about his imminent suffering, his death on the cross, his passing in Jerusalem. The message is clear – the way to that glory, for Jesus, and for us, is through the cross, through some kind of faithful suffering.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, concludes that the best answer to the mystery of suffering in life is that God does not take away our pain. Rather, God gives us the faith and the strength to go through that pain and find meaning in it.

The way of the world is to try to avoid pain and inconvenience. Is that not at the root of the plague of abortion in our society, and also rampant addictions? Children are now seen as an inconvenience by many, rather than as a gift from God. And one definition of addiction is an attempt to avoid legitimate suffering. We seek to medicate our pain, rather than choosing to be fully human and dealing with our pain. Over and over again, we try to avoid all suffering and pain, rather than finding meaning and purpose in that call to accept some suffering for the sake of the Gospel.

That pain begins usually at a very young age, when the love that we need to flourish as a human being is not there in our family of origin, or in our surroundings as a child. There may be neglect, abuse, ridicule, lack of appreciation and affection, a myriad of ways that our needs to be loved, to belong and to be valued are not met.

Psychologists tell us we can respond to that hurt in two ways: fight or flight. If we are anger-based people, we will immediately and instinctively retaliate and fight back, tit for tat. If we are fear-based people, we will flee. We can do that in a myriad of ways – alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, silent treatment, etc.

Jesus offers us another way, based on faith, and that is forgiveness. He teaches us to have faith, to enter into that pain, to hold that pain, to pray about it, to share our pain with trusted others, and to give that pain back to those who caused it with love that is forgiveness. That alone breaks the cycle of violence that rules so much of our world. That alone is the way to freedom, peace, new life and even joy.

That is impossible, many might say. Yes, on our own, that is impossible. However, in the second reading, Paul reminds us that we are not on our own: “This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.”

Paul is saying that the One who had power over even death, gives us that same power to neither fight back nor run away, but to deal with the suffering and pain in our lives in a way that will be light to the world.

Velma was abused by her future brother-in-law at the age of fourteen. She carried resentment towards him for fourteen years, until her own daughter was molested by his son. They moved to another community. Ten years after that, her granddaughter was abused by one of her own sons, the victim's uncle. Then Velma fell apart. The memory of what she went through, all her anger and resentment became too much for her to carry. She sought help from her pastor, who put her through a 12 Step healing process. She learned to express her hurt towards her abuser with love, following Matthew 18:15. She met with him in the presence of the pastor, read a letter to her abuser, and to the surprise of both men, asked him to forgive her for the way she had treated him for over twenty-five years. Then she got up and gave him a hug. She has since then shared a meal at table with him, and even danced with him. Her story at a 12 Step pilgrimage astounded her listeners, who said that was impossible. The underlying truth is that her actions *were impossible*, except through the power of the Holy Spirit. This truly is the new way that Jesus brought about, the transfigured way he invites us all into, the way of the Cross.

The Eucharist that we celebrate makes present for us that sacrificial love of Jesus on the cross that Moses and Elijah addressed on that mountain. It also empowers us to be like Jesus, to deal with our own pain as he did, rather than fight or flee.

So let us have faith, believe in Jesus and accept St. Paul's invitation to join with him in suffering for the sake of the Gospel.