

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Feb 24th 2013

PRE-PRAYERING

We are in a continual movement toward the Holy Mountain of the Eucharistic altar. Many churches have been built atop rises and hills to emphasize the “aboveness” of the Holy God. Amazing things happen in the scriptures up on top of mountains. We live on the level though and the Holy “aboveness” of God, while real, is revealed so that we live holy lives in the “belowness”.

We prepare to approach the Holy and the Holy is always approaching us. We do not have visions and direct conversations with the Holy One, but there are sightings and whispers which do lead us through our “ups” and “downs” of our unlevel ways.

REFLECTION

When I was a young child Sunday afternoons were dedicated to attending the Liberty Theater in Milwaukee for cowboy movies, cartoons and of course, coming attractions. These, though we didn't know it, were designed to make sure that our Sunday's obligation would be fulfilled again next week.

There were fantastic visions of beauty and bravado. Promises made and broken. There were delightful love-encounters which made us all squirm and laugh and feel good about life. It was all very real until we had to walk out into the late-afternoon SHADOWS.

The Book of Genesis is a complex collection of stories which lead the reader to an understanding of how Israel depicted its history and beginning identity as God's Holy People. We hear in today's First Reading, a foundational experience for that history. Fertility of body and land is the determinial blessing from God. Infertility would be a sign of God's displeasure.

Abram has no son and wonders how his name and family will continue. Will he ever have a legitimate son of his own flesh? What we hear is the conversation between God and Abram about this matter. Descendants will be plentiful and Abram does put his trust in the promise and the Promise-Maker. This is a tremendous area, this fertility, and Abram trusts.

This act of faith sets up the conditions for an important display or revelation by God. A covenant, or bonding contract, will be made by God. Both parties agree and walking between two parts of a slaughtered bull or ox would be like shaking hands. Well, even more so, each party states by this walking that if either breaks the contract, what happens to the animal should be done to the violator. The covenant is made by the more powerful to the less and is usually based on the awareness that the more powerful has been abundantly benevolent in the past and plans to continue. A promise for that future is made to Abram and it will be an abundance of land. So land and descendants predicting fertility are the beginning of Israel's relationship with their mysterious God. Abram has to believe that what he has seen and heard is real.

Now for the Coming Attractions. Luke's Gospel has presented Jesus as speaking to the disciples about how following him will involve suffering. Then Jesus takes three of his followers up a mountain and while there, is "transfigured" or seen differently. It is quite a light-show, complete with sound effects. More dazzling than his brightness was the state of his disciples after Jesus comes back to their senses. There are important elements offered by Luke to his readers about Jesus and discipleship during this experience. They have to do with "coming attractions" in the life of Jesus and the lives of his followers. Moses and Elijah are pictured as speaking to Jesus "of His exodus". This "exodus" of Jesus will be his living out the Paschal mission of being the Lamb to be slain.

The disciples would rather build three tents of gratitude as in the traditional celebration of Sukkot or Booths. Jesus is presented on this particular mountain as being in his glory. What is the "coming attraction" will be on another hill's top and in a definite, but different manner, it will be even a greater scene of glory. It will be a "figuration" which will claim God's people again from slavery to freedom and service.

There is an increasing sense in the more affluent countries of the world, of "entitlement". The disciples have this sense of requesting selfish possession of Jesus' glory and truth. Jesus heads them back down the mountain, inviting them to put aside, again, their self-preoccupation. Entitlement flows from a sense that we deserve only the glorious, intimate experiences of relationships and full meaning. Our wealth can provide many things, so much so, that we can begin to believe that we actually deserve everything. We should have power, health, ease, first-places at the head of lines. Life is owed to us and at the highest experiences. It is natural to desire this, but to expect it, demand it from God and others is not relational. The "exodus" referred to by Moses and Elijah moves Christ's followers off their mountains of entitlement to the acceptance of their actual "titlement" as followers who will suffer with and for him.

Jesus' coming down that mountain and heading for Jerusalem is the invitation to us to not take the Jerusalem bypass, but live with and through our own experiences of exodus. We are "titled" Human, Beloved, Called, Sent in and with him. These titles entitle us to all the graces of God's love as we walk his walk into our final transglorification with him.

The disciples walked out of their own Liberty Theater having participated in quite a show. They, like myself as a little boy, had to face the real. As the movie might have inspired me to be more brave, loving, and quick on the draw, the disciples were encouraged to live more closely with the Master and more faithfully as receivers of his call to follow.

"This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased; listen to Him."

Larry Gillick, S.J.