

To Journey with Moses, Elijah and One Another

Homily of March 7, 2004

by Fr. Brian Joyce

Our Lenten focus and theme is “We will journey in faith.” But we are not the only ones to make that journey and we are certainly not the first ones. In fact, Jesus had to make a journey too. It is interesting.... The gospel we listen to every Sunday during 2004 is all from Luke’s gospel. And Luke, in writing his gospel, represents the entire life of Jesus and constructs the entire life of Jesus as one single journey up to Jerusalem, to His suffering, to His death and to His Resurrection.

And today we hit a new and different point on the journey, the scene of the Transfiguration. Now, is that a high point or is it a low point? What do you think? We see Jesus praying and becoming bright and glowing and dazzlingly white. We have the white banner (here on the altar) to remind us of it. But I think it’s a low point because we are told that He is seen discussing and conversing about His exodus, His departure, His crossing over, in other words, about His suffering, passion and death in Jerusalem. That is what the topic is. That must have been a low point.

There is a lot of talk about the passion of Christ these days, courtesy of Mel Gibson. Let’s have a show of hands. How many have seen the movie?It looks like about 25% have seen it. I have not seen it. I am receiving very mixed reviews. One priest friend of mine was delighted with it and he especially liked the splash-back scenes of Christ’s earlier life. Another priest saw it and told me he would not recommend anyone ever see it, that it is abuse, not only of Christ and the audience, but of Christianity and of the gospel message of love. It just absolutely distorts it. That’s his view. I have had a parishoner tell me that he would never make the stations of the cross again without crying, now that he had seen “The Passion of the Christ.” Teenagers have gone to it and, for the first time, they got the message “This person really suffered for us.” One man pointed out to me that it is a great antidote because most of us were raised on holy cards that made Jesus appear soft, delicate and effeminate, and that could not have been the case. Here is my conclusion so far. Number one, I agree with Hollywood that no children should attend. Period. And number two, I plan to give a talk on it. March 19, I am going to give an evening on “The Passion according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and Mel” and I am even going to go see it in advance.

You know, Jesus didn’t see the movie either, but He had a very good idea of exactly how he would suffer and die. And He didn’t need a crystal ball to know that. And He didn’t need a magic vision to know that. And He didn’t need to be a rocket scientist to know that. He just needed two pieces of information and He had them. First of all, that in the society in which He

lived, which was very violent, which had a rigid caste system set up by religion and a tremendous amount of oppression set up by the occupying army from Rome, that if He continued to be faithful to His message of love and welcome to everyone equally, the outcast and the poor, that He would get confronted and He would get killed. He had to know that. And, secondly, He had to know that, like any Jewish leader or spokesperson of that day, He would get killed by being scourged, which was the legal requirement for any execution, unless it was of a woman or of a Roman soldier, and two, it would be by crucifixion, because that is the way the occupying Roman troops humiliated, made an example of, and executed any Jewish leader. And they did it, not just now and then. They did it very regularly. They did it not just for a few, not just for hundreds, but for thousands. Historians tell us that, on one day, they crucified a thousand Jewish leaders, and they stopped crucifying only because they had run out of wood and space.

So, Jesus knew exactly what was in store for Him, and, knowing that, how did He hang in there? How was it He remained faithful? That is a question we have to ask because it is a good question for ourselves. It is our question too. When things get very difficult or depressing or disappointing, how do we remain faithful. How do we hang in there? When we find we have made mistakes, things we wish we had never done, when we find that we are failures, when we find our weaknesses, how do we remain faithful? How do we hang in there? When we have to face illness, either our own or someone else's, or death, either someone else's or our own, how do we remain faithful? How do we hang in there?

The Transfiguration scene in today's gospel does not give us a catechism answer. And it does not give us a blueprint. But it gives us three clear clues. Remember the scene. You have Moses. You have Elijah. And you have the disciples, or friends of Jesus. Now, Moses always stands for the Torah, for the Law. So, Jesus had the standards, the values, the tradition in which He had been rooted and raised. And we need that too. Secondly, Elijah always stands for the prophetic tradition of the Jewish people, the vision and the challenge that calls for us to stretch beyond ourselves and beyond our present culture and societies. Jesus had that. And we need that too. And Jesus had the disciples. He did not go up to pray alone. He brought His friends with him, even though they fell asleep, even though they didn't get it. But we need that too.

For us these three clues, or these three figures, to me, mean three things that we need. First of all, simple things like values, like knowing right from wrong, like the Ten Commandments, like being faithful. Secondly, we need to be able to be stretched and willing to change. You notice what Jesus did. He didn't just stay with the Ten Commandments. He moved on to the Beatitudes, saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and the litmus test for salvation, how are you going to treat your brothers and sisters who are hungry, needy, in prison, the "least of them," which was really taking the values He had grown up with or was surrounded with (by the caste system that He lived in), or that we are surrounded with (by the system of capitalism or commercialism that we are surrounded with), and turn them on their heads. And thirdly, companions on the journey. We need companions on the journey, family, friends. We need Church. Now, Church gets tricky because if we need companions and we are a community, I want to tell you I would be nervous about asking any one of you to stand up now and, in this

close-knit community, give me the first names of fifty percent of the people who are here, or thirty percent, or ten percent, or maybe more than five people. And yet, at the same time, we are companions on the journey. Now, small Christian communities help. Ministries help. Volunteer activities help. But, just being together, greeting one another when we come in, greeting each other at the greeting of peace, and supporting one another by singing our faith and hearing it from one another, praying our faith and hearing it from one another, we are companions on the journey.

Now these are great ideas and ideals, but, at least for me, I have to put a face on what can seem to be abstract ideas and ideals. I need real-life people who have names, just like the gospel-writers were careful to give us not ideas, but they named them: Moses, Elijah, Peter, John, James. Who has carried me on the journey? Who can I put the names to? Well, let's take all of those three areas that seems so important in this scene. Monsignor Wade, who was our pastor and friend here for thirty-seven years, certainly stands for the tradition and the standards and the values and being faithful that we are being called to. When it comes to vision, being prophetic, and willing to grow and change, for me, and I think for many of you, it would be Margo Schorno, who was our associate pastor for twelve years until her death. Remember how she stretched us and challenged us by the way she dealt with parish life and the way she dealt with her own life and her own illness. When it comes to company, I have got to tell you, I belong to a priest support group. There are seven of us. We have been meeting regularly at least once a month for over thirty years. I always say the group is made up of six priests and one ex-priest because one of the members is a bishop. And we, sometimes during the Holy Hour that we spend, we fall asleep, like the disciples. And sometimes we don't get it, like the disciples. But we are there for each other. And that is the face and name I can put there.

There is a spiritual you might know: "You got to walk that lonesome valley. You got to walk it for yourself. Nobody else will walk it for you. You got to walk it for yourself." Well, we do have to make the journey for ourselves. But we do not have to make the journey alone. In fact, we cannot make the journey alone. So, may we continue to find our own Moses, our own Elijah, our own disciples, our own Moses who stands for values and standards, our own Elijah who stands for and provides challenge and vision and stretching us, our own co-disciples who share with us as faith friends and soulmates. May we find them and may we journey in faith with each other. Amen.