

THE MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCE

2nd Sunday Lent

Year B

Gen 22:1-2,9-13,15-18; Ps 116:10,15-19; Rom 8:31-34; Mk 9:2-10

One of the most famous mountaintop experiences of our time was that of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. We don't know exactly when and where he had it, but he spoke about it in his prophetic Mountaintop Speech made in Memphis on the 3rd of April, 1968. As it turned out, that speech was to be his last because the following day he was stopped by an assassin's bullet. His Mountaintop Speech ended with these words:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now...because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land....”

We can only imagine what would have become of the followers of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement if King had died without making that speech. Maybe he would have gone down in history as just another disillusioned dreamer. Maybe his followers would have suffered a loss of faith in the cause for which MLK lived and died. Maybe they would have given up on the Civil Rights Movement and the Dream. But that speech made all the difference. It prepared them for the trauma that was soon to come. It assured them that Rev. King was not simply a victim of circumstance but that his death was somehow part of God's plan in the long struggle for equality.

King compared his situation to that of Moses who was appointed by God to lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. After a lifetime of faithful service as leader of God's people in their long journey

through the desert, Moses himself would die without reaching the Promised Land. That such a selfless and committed leader, who had spent himself in the cause of liberation, should fail to reach it himself, seems incomprehensible to us; but that appears to be a regular pattern in the mystery of God's design. Now, in order to help Moses and his people bear the shock and the consequential crisis of faith this would generate, God led Moses up Mount Nebo, and there on the mountaintop, God granted him a preview of the Promised Land and its glory. With that, Moses was reassured that God was still being faithful to His promise, and the people were reassured that Moses was indeed the man of God that he claimed to be.

Something similar is happening on the Mount of the Transfiguration in today's gospel. James and John had followed Jesus because they wanted special seats at his

right hand and at his left [Mk 10:37]. Peter wanted to know what he would get since he had left everything to follow Jesus [Mk 10:28]. These were men who believed that the fact that Jesus was the Messiah was going to translate into visible, tangible dividends in this life both for Jesus and for them, his followers. If Jesus had not prepared them beforehand by giving them a glimpse into the heavenly glory that was His and theirs at the end of their journey of faith, they would have been even the more devastated by the shock of Jesus' shameful death as a public criminal. Just as the Mountaintop Speech prepared Martin Luther King and his followers, and the mountaintop experience on Mount Nebo prepared Moses and the Israelites, so the Transfiguration prepared Jesus and his special assistants for the trauma that was soon to come.

Many of us spend our daily lives in the valley of toil and hardship. We feel abandoned by God and begin to

doubt our faith and its promises. If we remain close to Jesus during this season of Lent, one mountaintop experience is all that we may need, and our doubts and fears will turn into blessed assurance...all because our eyes have seen the glory of the Lord—our own future glory.

Allow me to relate to you my own Mountaintop Experience. The establishment and management of a prison ministry in the Chattanooga Deanery was possibly the most daunting challenge of my life. To say I've been at times overcome by frustration is an understatement. Obstacle after obstacle, coupled with disappointment after disappointment in prison officials and inmates, I just could not see the light at the end of the tunnel...any vision of the Promised Land was blurred beyond recognition.

Then I encountered an inmate awaiting federal trial. Fr. Miguel and I conducted the first mass ever celebrated

at Silverdale Prison...our only communicant being Gary Salles, that federal inmate, now convicted, awaiting sentencing. He was sent to the federal prison in Butner, NC, to serve 11 years. Gary had a massive conversion, a Damascus Road experience, at that mass said for him. Within his first year at Butner, he formed a Catholic Congregation among the federal prisoners which, over time, grew to 80 strong contenders for the Faith. He brought inmate after inmate into the Church year after year. Being musically talented, he formed and led a schola which sang at every monthly mass and every weekly Holy Communion Service. When the Bishop of the Diocese of Raleigh visited the prison for the first time to say mass, he was exhilarated by what he saw and heard. As a result, he asked the Franciscans in his Diocese to minister to the prison on a regular basis.

Gary Salles became my “poster child” for the prison ministry...and he offered me a Mountaintop Experience that prepared me for the hardships that I knew I would continue to encounter in this challenging ministry.

The Sunday before Lent, 2015, we lost Gary. He’d been very sick and finally succumbed to his illness some five years before his release from prison. His mark on me and on my prison ministry is indelibly etched. I pray for the repose of his soul...will forever remember him...and will always call upon the Mountaintop Experience he gave me for encouragement and purpose.

And finally, back to the Gospel reading: the custom of reading today’s Gospel near the beginning of Lent may have come from an ancient Tradition which held that the Transfiguration of Jesus took place forty days before Good Friday. The three disciples who witnessed the Mystery of the Transfiguration could not fully understand

what had taken place until after the Resurrection of the Lord. Indeed, the Transfiguration is indissociable from the Resurrection, and the Resurrection is intrinsically linked to the Eucharist. So, Communion at Mass today is directly linked to the Transfiguration. We are, in fact, truly transfigured when we unite ourselves to Jesus in His Eucharist. So, let us follow Jesus to the mountaintop...let us each change our life in that mountaintop experience as we go through Lent, leading us to Easter...and let our regular participation in the Sacrifice of the Mass prepare us in our taking up our cross and walking with Christ as his followers.

...May God bless you all!