

2nd Sunday of Lent (B)
(Genesis 22:1-2.9-13.15-18 / Mark 9:2-10)
25.02.2018
Fear & Puzzlement

In his Gospel, in general, St Mark does not give us a glossy and photoshopped image of the apostles and the disciples.

In the episode of the Transfiguration, he is the only evangelist to mention that Peter, James and John are frightened and again he is the only one to inform us that when they come down from the mountain, the three disciples are completely lost about the meaning of the event they have witnessed and of Jesus' words.

It is salutary and helpful for us to be reminded that three of Jesus' closest disciples experienced fear and puzzlement in his presence because fear and puzzlement are also part of our lives.

Out of fear, St Peter speaks words which make little sense and which, in fact, do not reflect his true feelings. How can he be frightened and at the same time say that "it is wonderful for us to be here". That being said, things could have been worse. Fear could have made the apostles run down from the mountain.

It is important for us to learn to channel our fears in a just and, as far as it is possible, in a fruitful way. Fear is a powerful energy which can cower us or generate violent reactions. Fears make us hide or bite. Unlike St Peter, the first step is to be truthful about our fears. To say that all is good while we are frightened is not very healthy.

Lent is an opportunity for us to look at everything in our lives that holds us prisoners. Maybe we could begin by trying to face some of the fears which prevent us from freely relating to God, to others and to ourselves.

After being afraid, the three disciples are puzzled about Jesus' words. In our turn, we must admit that there are many things that we do not understand in the Scriptures, in God's plan for the world and for our personal lives.

The truth is that the Christian community is not a group of people who know everything and who have ready-made answers to every possible question. We are the people of the way, we are wrestling with life and death, trying to discern God's presence and action in all things.

At the moment, in the media and on the internet, we are expected to deal with essential questions at a very fast pace and in a few words. The reality is that in order to discern the meaning of life, of our lives and deaths we need time, we need to dialogue with each other and be patient when we open the wrong door or stumble along the way. We need perseverance and trust in God's unfailing presence by our side whatever may happen.

The disciples needed to talk about what they had just experienced. It was necessary for them to process the information together and to journey with it until its meaning might become clearer to them.

This lesson from the event of the Transfiguration is quite liberating. It frees us from the pressure to understand everything at once. Moreover it should prevent us from silencing too quickly every debate that arises.

What I have just said entails a great deal of patience with oneself and with others. This is a virtue that we should practice with a particular emphasis during our Lenten pilgrimage.

The Christian community and our families should be places where we allow one another to express puzzlement and where we should learn to journey together with our disagreements.

The mount of the Transfiguration is not just a place “where it is good to be” as St Peter says, it is also a place which brings into light our limitations and poverty, it is a place where we become more aware that there are fears within us which need to be dealt with properly and that there are many things in our lives and in the lives of the world which are difficult to understand.

However whether we think of our fears or of our unanswered questions, the Transfiguration of Christ speaks of light and brightness and so we have to remember that we are not left in the dark. Christ living within us is our light, whom shall we fear (cf. Ps 27:1)?

The light of the Transfiguration is within us as our guide and our strength. If it is not yet as dazzlingly white as it was and is in Christ this is not Christ's fault but partly ours. When we wander far from the light, when we clutter our minds and hearts with petty idols, when we entertain unhealthy feelings of bitterness, revenge or resentment, when we rely on our own strength and abilities, then doubts and fears can overcome us.

Lent is not a time when we are supposed to be miserable and irritable because we stop smoking or eating cakes and chocolates; it is the appointed time for us when we are invited to return to Christ our light. He is the inner lamp within us which needs to be regularly filled with the oil of love, a generous love of God, an unconditional love of others and a right love of ourselves.

Strengthened by love, we will be able to cope with all that happens in our lives and around us. We may have to wrestle hard and for a long time with a particular situation. The truth is that the promise of the Transfiguration is not that we will never have good reasons to be afraid or that we will have answers to all our questions but that, with Christ, we are equipped for the journey, whatever it may entail.

As Julian of Norwich reminds us: “God did not say, ‘You will never have a rough passage, you will never be over-strained, you will never feel uncomfortable’, but he did say, ‘You will never be overcome’.” (*Rev.* ch. 68)