

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)
Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg
10-11 February 2018

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“We do not proclaim ourselves,” St Paul says in our epistle today; or if, like me, you remember the King James Version, “we preach not ourselves.” I am always mindful of this apostolic injunction, so I rarely talk about myself in my sermons. Honestly, it’s not so much because of any modesty or spiritual reticence as because I lead a fairly boring life and have no good stories.

But maybe just this once . . .

It was the Third Sunday of Advent of this very liturgical year. That Sunday is particularly special to me because it’s always the Sunday nearest the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood—nine years this past December. St Andrew’s in Tampa had Lessons and Carols that evening, and being the church music junkie that I am, I was there. The opening hymn was— isn’t it always? —“Once in royal David’s city.” In my usual obnoxious way, I was singing the tenor line with gusto (we had only the words in the bulletin, but I can’t be defeated that easily: of course I know the tenor line by heart), until we came to stanza five:

And our eyes at last shall see him

And for a whole stanza, I could do nothing but sob. It must have been quite a spectacle.

And our eyes at last shall see him,
through his own redeeming love;
for that child who seemed so helpless
is our Lord in heaven above;
and he leads his children on
to the place where he is gone.

Well, I always get choked up by that stanza. I don't think I've ever actually managed to sing it. But this time, for the first time, I asked myself why. And the answer came back with a terrifying clarity:

I just want to see Jesus.

Do you want to see Jesus? Do you long, with all your heart, to stand face to face with him, to see the scars, to see the glory, to see the dazzling whiteness, to see human life divinely lived and divine life taking on our humanity?

I just want to see Jesus.

I want it, and I fear it. Because make no mistake: it is terrifying. Not for nothing did Peter babble incoherently when the glory of the Lord was revealed. How many times have I poked fun at him in Transfiguration sermons? But the revelation of the glory of Jesus is a shattering, disorienting experience, and small wonder if he doesn't know what to say, knows only that it is good to be there, and longs, even as he fears, to abide there with the Lord of glory.

I just want to see Jesus.

I want it, and I fear it. Paul says, "Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." And how much of unbelief, of half-heartedness, of love for the world and for the things of this world, still blinds me to the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ? Of course I am not an unbeliever. Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

I just want to see Jesus.

I want it, and I fear it. That dazzling whiteness doesn't come without a cost. Mark adds a very Marcan detail in his story of the Transfiguration. It gets elided a bit in our translation, but the Greek says that Jesus' garments were whiter than any fuller could whiten them. We don't have fullers any more, so this detail is lost on us. A fuller was someone who cleaned and thickened cloth by stomping on it or

beating it. And fuller's soap was sort of like lye; it was harsh, and the process of making it gave off absolutely vile smells; you had to make it far away from where people lived.

Transformation—seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ—is a harsh, tough, messy, smelly business. And how comfortable it is, how comfortable I am, avoiding the fuller's whitening, content with the dirt, enough worldliness to be at ease, enough dimming of the divine radiance so that I can bear to look on it after all, or at least look on that passable image of it that I have fashioned for myself to soothe my weak eyes.

But I do, I do want to see Jesus. Really see him, see the full radiance, stare into the sun with eagle eyes and know myself at home there.

I just want to see Jesus.

And here we are, on the cusp of Lent. Time to submit to the fuller's soap. Time to strengthen my eyes. No transfiguration without transformation. No Easter without Lent. No resurrection without the Cross. It's not about petty abstinences; it's not about a spiritual checklist we can tick off rather mechanically for forty days. It's about—our Collect says it perfectly—it's about being changed into his likeness from glory to glory. So that when I do see Jesus, when like my namesake apostle I see the scars and know him for who he is and shout with joy, "My Lord and my God," it will be because I too have a share in the dazzling whiteness, and I can bear to look on him because I have submitted myself to the fuller's whitening, to the taking up of the Cross.

I just want to see Jesus.

Praise God for the vision of Christ's glory. Praise God for Lent. Praise God for the glimpse of the risen Christ. Praise God for the sight of Jesus veiled under the forms of bread and wine. Praise God for the promise that we shall at length behold him unveiled for evermore, the crucified, risen, and ascended King of Glory, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*