

Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. This coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, the season of Lent begins. In many places, the Ash Wednesday service includes the imposition of ashes on the forehead, in the form of a cross. The pastor reminds the people of their mortal nature with these words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return." Many traditionalists will also give up something as a daily reminder of Christ's sacrifice and as an indicator of our penance for doing those things that we have done that are offensive to God. Some of you will, perhaps, do a Lenten study, or be more diligent in prayer. Lent is a season of penance, a season for making changes and striving for a deeper walk with God.

Lent is also a season of anticipation. Lent looks forward to Easter and Resurrection. We look forward in Lent to the eschatological event of Easter and the realization of the Christian promise, the indwelling of God's Kingdom in all its glory, with Christ Jesus as the King of Kings. The problem is that for us, now living in faith, Easter is neither complete in our world or in our lives. We have only a foretaste of the glory of the Resurrection in this life. We are aware, in faith, of the Eternal Easter, and that awareness lifts us and builds our faith even more. But the fullness of Easter is not yet here for us, no matter how strongly we believe. Saint Paul once said that in this life our faith is like looking at God through a distorted window. In the life that will come, we will see God face to face. Now we must live in faith and hope, realizing that until our transition into God's heaven, we live in an imperfect world and we live with human and therefore imperfect faith. So Lent is still a necessity. Lent helps us build our faith.

The spiritual life, like the emotional life, is not a straight line on the graph of life. Like the Dow Jones, or a sine wave tilted upward on its horizontal axis, the Christian's life goes upward and onward over time, but it still must have its peaks and valleys. The peaks are our spiritual highs; the valleys are those times when we stumble and God seems far off. The valleys are moments, days, weeks, perhaps months of spiritual downers. We all go through them and it is futile to deny them. Spiritual downers are part of the human condition and we must remember that they, too, can lead us into spiritual growth. I want you to hear that never has the Christian promise been a promise of an eternal rose garden, not in this life in any case. If that were the Christian promise, then how could Jesus have ever said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

What does all of this have to do with this Sunday? In today's gospel reading we read the story of the Transfiguration. In a nutshell, Jesus, along with Peter, James and John climbed a mountain. On that mountain, Jesus was transfigured. The Greek word that gives us the word "transfigured" is *metamorphothe*, or metamorphoses. The literal meaning is to change one's form. In the moment of the transfiguration, Jesus was revealed to be what he would be beyond Easter. This was not a removal of the scales of spiritual blindness from the eyes of his disciples. That is an absolute misinterpretation of the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration points to what Easter itself would usher in, the

resurrected glory of God's son. The disciples saw him, as he would be, not as he was. This was the archetypal spiritual high.

It is interesting that the disciples wanted to stay where they were and cling to the vision. They did not want to come down from the mountain because they did not want to come down from the spiritual high. But Jesus led them from the mountain, ordering them to tell no one of the vision until he was raised from the dead. If you read on in this story, Jesus then began to teach his disciples that he must suffer and die, and if they wanted to be disciples, then they must also take up the cross and follow. Taking up the cross and following is something they did not want to hear. Jesus dying is something they did not want to contemplate. Peter, especially wanted to argue against it and our Lord rebuked him strongly. It's hard to let go of the spiritual highs but the lesson today is an important lesson. There is no Easter without Good Friday and, for us, there can be no Easter without a season of Lent. There are Lents that we live that have nothing to do with days on a calendar; there are times of our lives that are spiritual valleys. They are dark moments, but in the darkness the light can best shine.

The Transfiguration points to what will be as it reminds us of where we are. It points to Easter while it prepares us for Lent. It keeps us grounded in our world, today, even as we move on in our life in faith. *Amen.*

