

Lent 2

Last Thursday, as we were preparing for the visitors to our pantry, we had an interesting conversation about our downstairs chapel. One of us said that she missed an image of the Father when looking up to the altar. There is the cross, but there is no Father or Holy Spirit. Someone spoke up that it is the same situation upstairs in our real church. There too there is simply the cross. Yes, there are three paintings high above the altar, but these are no paintings of the Father and the Son. And that seems to be situation in most Catholic churches. There is just the cross. And the cross' presence is not simply a matter of taste. No, the Church prescribes that a cross be on or near the altar to remind us of the nature of the Mass that we celebrate, that it is not simply a meal but a sacrifice because it is the making present of Jesus' shedding his blood for us on the cross in a sacramental way, that is, in and through bread and wine. And we do that because Jesus did it. He looked forward to his death on the cross when he celebrated his last supper with his friends before his death and identified the bread and wine as his body broken and blood poured out for us on the cross. We do the same in the Mass, but from the other side. We look back to his sacrifice on the cross, while he looked forward to it. And then

there was a wise crack. The Father has never had his picture taken. So we cannot portray Him. That is true, but

What was also interesting was how our conversation partners conceived of Jesus. At first I thought that the woman who wanted an image of the Father may have been denying Jesus' divinity since Jesus was not enough for her as far as visual imagery went. But that was not the case. She was simply saying what the Church teaches, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not interchangeable, that while all three are God, they are not God in the same way. She was defending our trinitarian understanding of God as a triune relationship, something which while it may seem distant and abstract, is really very much in sync with the way we think today. For we all recognize today that to be human, to be a person, is to be in relationship with others. We are our relationships. And what is true of us is also true of God, according to Christian theology: God is relationship. There is no God but God the father, who is father because there is a son, and vice versa, and there is no Spirit except the love which the Father and Son have for each other. God is relationship. Therefore, our friend was justified in her seeking for the Father's image.

And yet we also have to say that we come to our knowledge of God understood in this way only because we have met Jesus. Both Judaism and Islam claim that God has no son. We differ from them precisely in that claim. It is what makes Christianity Christianity. And it came about because the first Christians would not accept anything but a divine status for Jesus. In the fourth century there was an Egyptian priest named Arius who wanted to say that Jesus was not divine because the Word of God which took flesh in him was not divine, was not God but a creature of God, though God's very first creation. For awhile his belief became widespread because certain emperors supported it, but eventually the Church, relying on the Scriptures and on the way Christians prayed, rejected his belief and asserted that the Word which becomes flesh in Jesus is the divine Word or Son of God. Therefore, in meeting and touching Jesus we meet and touch the divine Son.

Last Sunday our Gospel presented us with this Jesus as being tempted by Satan to adore him and to pursue a course of glory and power and self-love. Jesus rejected him. In today's Gospel we see Jesus transformed into a glorious state and surrounded by Moses and Elijah, the greatest prophets of his people, God's greatest messengers to them. But this glorified Jesus speaks of his exodus, that is, of his death. Thus this moment of glory is simply that. It

must disappear and what will remain for Jesus will be the journey to Jerusalem and death there. Jesus knows where he is going and accepts beforehand his fate, for this is the kind of messiah he has chosen to be. But Peter misunderstands, and in a threefold way. First, he wants to prolong the moment: “Master, it is good that we are here.” Second, although he as the spokesperson for the other disciples has already confessed Jesus as the messiah, he still does not understand that term as Jesus did. He still does not understand a suffering messiah. Third, he does not yet understand Jesus’ divinity: “. . . let us make tree tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one Elijah.” He puts Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah. Jesus is to have his tent just as they do. He has not yet grasped Jesus’ absolute uniqueness as the divine Son of God.

There are many things which we share with other believers in God. We all believe that God is good. We all believe in the Golden Rule, that we should treat others as we would like to be treated by others. But we Christians are unique in our belief that God has a Son, and that this Son has become human in Jesus of Nazareth. We are also unique in our belief that this Jesus has been raised from the dead and that his resurrection is not a one-shot deal but is a promise of our own resurrection. And we are also unique in believing that Jesus came to the resurrection only through defeat

and torture and crucifixion, and that we, as his disciples, must go the same route. We are to take up our cross daily. It sounds awful. But it leads to life, to resurrection. And that is what we contemplate once again this Lenten season.