

“Built Up in Christ Above All”

The Eighth Sunday after Epiphany – Presided by: Fr. Gary W. Thurman

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Cathedral of the King

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Sunday, February 26, 2017: The Eighth and Last Sunday after Epiphany

Exodus 24: 12 – 18/Psalm 99/2 Peter 1: 16 – 21/Matthew 17: 1 - 9

Fr. Gary Thurman

As we come to this last Sunday of Epiphany, before the dawning of the Season of Lent, the Scriptures are proclaiming the same message - how Christ manifested Himself as the Son of God. Every year, the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the gospel is always this particular topic. We read this gospel from Matthew, Mark and Luke in the Liturgical Cycle as they prepare us for the Season of Lent. All three of these synoptic evangelists share this story.

Every year, different churches celebrate this Feast, this event at a different time of the year. It gets a lot of attention. What is there that transpired? Jesus was transfigured, and turning that into a noun, it is called the Transfiguration. What is the Transfiguration? What exactly happened during this time?

In 1994, it was my first time to prepare the Proper for this Feast and I was asking myself, “What is this Transfiguration thing?” I asked different people about this and all of us came to a consensus that we had no idea what it was. We were clueless about this Feast. Over the years, the Lord has been good and He has taught us in the Cathedral of the King what this Feast was all about.

In one simple sentence, I define the Transfiguration as a picture of the kingdom of God here on earth. This was what Peter, James and John saw before their eyes so that they could tell what the kingdom of God is all about and what is on earth. All three gospels, before it starts telling the story, had Jesus mentioning something. He was in conversation with different people, with different disciples and He says, “Some are standing here who will not die until they see the kingdom of God.” The next verse says, “Jesus took Peter, James, and John and let them up on a high mountain.”

I want us to see something that Matthew and Mark did not include, but Luke includes very powerfully, “He took Peter, James, and John up to the mountain and while He was praying the appearance of His face became different.” Jesus was praying on the mountain before Moses and Elijah and His appearance became different. There is no evidence of the kingdom of God without prayer. If you want to see the kingdom of God in its power manifested on earth, if you want to see the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, you need to pray! This will not happen without prayer.

In Luke 6, the disciples were asking Jesus how to pray. He said, “Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your Name.” A lot of times, we are taught that this means that we start our prayer with worship, but saying “Hallowed be Your name” is not a form of worship. It is

a petition. It is the prayer asking, “Lord, we ask that Your name be hallowed.” Hallowed means to revere, to respect and to obey God’s name, and this is the beginning of the Kingdom. The Kingdom starts with the King. In Psalm 99, it says that the Lord reigns, and the Lord is the King. If He is the King, and in the presence of a King – His name, His character – must be revered, respected and obeyed.

After the first petition, “Hallowed by Your name,” the second petition related to it, “If you are going to be King, if You are going to hallowed and obeyed in this Kingdom, let us bring this Kingdom not just in heaven, but bring it to earth. Your Kingdom come on earth as it is heaven.” This was part of the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray every day. We can see that prayer is woven together with the kingdom of God. The Kingdom won’t come to its fullness on earth without regular prayer. It is mandatory for the kingdom of God to be manifested and we are able to participate in here on earth as it is in heaven.

Where was this happening? When people got heavenly visions in the Bible, they got transported to heaven. When Isaiah got his vision, “I saw the Lord seated on the throne high and lifted up,” how could he see this? He could have been in heaven, not on earth. When Ezekiel saw a very elaborate vision of heaven, he was transported to heaven. When John, the Revelator, got the vision which was recorded in the Book of Revelations, someone said, “Come up here,” and he ascended to the throne room.

In the gospel, Peter, James and John did not go to heaven; heaven came to them. Moses and Elijah did not belong to earth anymore; their residence in some form was in heaven, but they came to earth. This was heaven visiting earth. This is part of God’s plan and this was the picture. Don’t get so focused on when you are going to heaven or when you are going to die and coming back that there will be the kingdom of God. The picture of God is here on earth. It is a higher realm, so this is why the disciples went up to a higher mountain.

When the kingdom of God interacts with earth, it is a higher realm than what we are used to. It is a higher way, but it is still a physical way. It is still a way of matter and foreign substance. Peter was worried, “You, three guys, may get hot because we are on a higher mountain. You are sweating. Let us make some tents so that you don’t get too hot.” Peter was concerned with the physical because when the kingdom of God interacts on earth as it is in heaven, it still involves a physical realm. Sometimes, we think that the kingdom of God is all spiritual and nothing physical about it. It is a marriage of both, and this is what we see in the picture.

In the picture, standing there with Jesus was Moses. I got a new title for Moses as I was studying this. I want to call Moses as the founder of kingdom of priests. In Exodus 19:6 and Revelations 5:10, it tells us that God was speaking to Moses, “I want to make My people a kingdom of priests.” We see that God led His children out of Egypt, and He led them through the wilderness. He led them to the Promised Land, and all that we see that God was doing was bringing His people to a new country. However, God’s plan was much

bigger than this. God's plan went back to the Garden of Eden where Adam was the priest. It was a kingdom of priests involving Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and the other children. Adam's role in the Garden was to expand the Garden; to be fruitful and to multiply; to cultivate the Garden; and as the priest of the Garden, he was to spread the ways of God all throughout the Garden, and basically all throughout the earth.

God's goal was always for man to be priests over creation, ruling over creation that God had made. God's plan was to place man in that position. They struggled in the times of Noah, Abraham, and all the others; but to Moses, God said, "Let us restore what was in the Garden. Let us bring back the Kingdom on earth." He said to Moses, "I want you to restore that society that was in the Garden. In that society, here is how you are supposed to worship." God told Moses all about the worship and gave him the plans for the Tabernacle and the temple. He said, "In this society, there is one God, and that I am He. You worship Him and nobody else. In this society, we don't murder each other. In this society, we don't steal from each other. In this society, we have certain things that we follow. We take a Sabbath holiday." All these things that we call the Law were to show God working through Moses to establish and reestablish this new society.

This was the restoration of the Garden that was there. The Law describes the society, defines that society, and everything that Moses did, and it is highlighted by two commandments that were the most important: love God and love your neighbor. These two commandments defined in a nutshell the new society. Moses was there because he was the founder of that kingdom of priests, which we could call the kingdom of God.

In Psalm 99, the description of the Kingdom was, "When the Lord was reigning, justice and equity and righteousness are established." All these things are ways to define God's kingdom and describe what it was like. Moses was there in the Transfiguration to show us that this is the picture of the kingdom of God and how it was established under him. Elijah represents the prophets, and they had one role, which is to explain to people how this new society was going to come to its fullness to mankind.

From the time of Moses, the nation of Israel tried and tried, but they couldn't just get it. When you call him a king or a priest, what is his role of a priest? A priest was to draw people to God, to be a bridge between man and God. The Israelites got the part when they went to the Promised Land. They got the part where they were the blessed of God, but they never got the part where they were supposed to reach out to all the other nations of the earth and bring them to the knowledge of God.

Over and over again, the Old Testament told them this, but they always forgot it. Isaiah 60 says, "Arise, shine, your light has come. All sorts of nations shall come to you, and they will fall down and come to you and say, 'How do we worship like you worship? Where is your God? Teach us the ways of your God.'" This was the role of Israel – to be a Kingdom of priests; to bring the Philistines into the Kingdom, the Assyrians to the Kingdom; the

Amorites, the Jebusites, the Hittites were all supposed to be worked into the kingdom of God. They never quite got it because there was a missing element, and the prophets were there to explain what the missing element was. Every one of the major or the minor prophets proclaim that there is a Messiah coming. He is the One who will take up the work of God and bring the kingdom of God in its reality on earth as it is in heaven.

Now, we see the picture of Moses, the founder of the kingdom of priests; Elijah, representing the prophets, saying, "Everything you've got is good, but you also need to add the element of the Messiah." We now see the promise of Moses; the promise of Elijah; and Christ is in the middle and the voice comes out, "This is My Beloved Son, listen to Him!" The picture is that Moses is pointing the way to the Messiah; Elijah is pointing the way to the Messiah, and Jesus is in the middle saying to us, "This is the One who is going to put all together. This is the One who is going to make it possible, to take all the hopes, and the dreams, and all the promises and make them reality on earth not just in heaven." Then God says, "Listen to Him!"

The Transfiguration is all about how Jesus received honor and glory from God the Father. This is what happened when God pointed to Christ in the midst of Moses and Elijah saying to us, "That is Him. Listen to Him!" When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be Your name," the Lord's name is to be revered, to be respected and obeyed so we need to listen to Him. If there is no obedience to the King, there is no Kingdom. It is a vital part of the Kingdom of listening to the voice of the King and obeying it.

Deuteronomy 8:3 says, "...Understand that man does not live BY bread alone, but man lives BY everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord." Sometimes, the preposition is different. It is said, "Man lives on bread or man doesn't just live on bread." Using "on" means that there is something that is sustaining you or is supplying you. The Word of God sustains us, but in Deuteronomy, it is the preposition BY because these are words to live BY. They are not just words to live on, but to live by. When we say, "These are the words to live by," it means there are guiding force, there are driving force, which are words that we live by and words that we do. This is the importance of the words that come to us from Christ, as the King, in the kingdom of God.

It is so easy to come and say, "There are the words of Christ, I receive it. It is a beautiful word. Are there any other options? Are there any other ideas? Let us see which is best." In the kingdom of God, that is out of the window. In the kingdom of God, we live BY every word that comes from the King. We respect and obey Him. Like the voice that came from heaven, "This is My Beloved Son, here is your Messiah, listen to Him!"

The theme for today is "Built Up in Christ's Above All." It is Christ's voice alone that we must hear and obey. There are always many other voices, innumerable voices out there. Some of them sound pretty good; some of them may be the right thing, but at the wrong time; some of them may be the wrong thing at the right time. We need to be able to

understand that in the kingdom, there is the King with the voice and His voice is what we listen to and live BY. Every word that comes from the mouth of God, listen to Him!

This solidifies for us the picture of God. Yes, there is the Kingdom that is coming; a Kingdom that is already here in its beginning stages. It only works when Christ is the King, when He is the Messiah and we understand His role as that.

As the vision and the situation is ending in the gospel story, there is a verse that says, “While they were coming down the mountain, Jesus said, ‘Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.’” First of all, why is it the vision? Didn’t this really happen? Didn’t Peter, James and John really see Jesus glowing? Didn’t they really see Elijah and Moses? Why say that it is a vision? Why not say anything until Jesus is risen from the dead? What were the disciples wondering about? What was Jesus rising from the dead mean?

What do you mean by vision? Was this really true? Why did Jesus say, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” This is because until the Son of Man does arise, it is only a vision. Until the Son of Man has risen from the dead and the resurrection power flows through Him, He makes that resurrection power available to all God’s children, and all the kingdom of God on earth is just a vision. It is just a dream, a hope. He says, “Hold on to that a little bit until I rise from the dead. Once I have trampled down death by death, once I have brought resurrection and power to life, and made it available to all My people, even now, in a provisional basis, in a foretaste basis, and when I come again in power, all will rise again. Until that day, don’t mention it. Don’t say it yet. Until that day, it is a dream; it is a vision; it is a hope.” Jesus said, “When I rise again,” the vision will become a reality.

The Transfiguration only happened a few months before Holy Week. The good news is Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death. For you and I, He has already risen, so the power of the kingdom of God, the work of the Kingdom of God, the manifestation of the kingdom of God is available to us here in this earthly realm. There are times and places where the veil is lifted and heaven creeps in into our earthly existence and shows forth in power. It is the power to heal, the power to restore, the power to love the unlovable, and the power to do God’s work. This can happen today here on this earth in a foretaste arrangement. It will happen in its fullness when Christ returns and all are resurrected. Between now and then, sometimes resurrection power can creep in.

God can lift the veil a bit and can bring us a foretaste of His kingdom. The question for us: why doesn’t it happen more often? Why do my friends get sick? Why did my wife get sick? Why did I get sick? Why do I still have relationship problems at work or at home? Why do I still have financial trouble? Why are these things going on? I believe that the reason is that the amount of God’s kingdom that shatters into our earthly existence and makes His presence known here is directly related to how much we listen to the Word of

God in the mountain, “There is My Son, listen to Him.” The more we listen to His words, the more we obey His words; and the more we open the door for the Kingdom to be manifested in our lives and in our existence in this day and age.

Sometimes, we are stubborn, and we choose other plans. We don’t stop and listen to hear God’s plan. Sometimes, we hear it and we are open to many options. When this happens, we end up firmly entrenched on planet earth in the ways of man. We are stuck in the old society.

What can we do? There is this Season of Lent that shows up. The Transfiguration shows us a picture of the kingdom of God here on earth. In Lent, we look at what we have and how we can move from it. There is this intensive care for the soul to really ask the Lord, “Lord, where are the places that I am not listening to You?” As a Church, “Where are the places that we are not listening to You?”

As a Church, I believe that we can be much further ahead. We can be much more successful than we are, but we are not always together on things. If we, as a Church, can come together in unity, the picture of the kingdom of God here on earth will be much more like in heaven amongst us. There will be more healing, more restoration and the more power of God in evidence in us. There will be a wonderful evidence of the kingdom of God of His joy, peace and righteousness.

Lent is where we come and take this picture of the Transfiguration and say, “How do we go from where we are to there?” I will give you two ways. This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday where we have two Masses. In the evening, Bishop Ariel will be sharing about listening. Be here. Receive the actions of Ash Wednesday. Hear the message of God about listening. Every Wednesday from thereon, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Wednesday, the messages will be about Body-building love called to a higher life. Come, make an effort so that we can begin to be built up into the true, divine, godly love. The challenge is: can we shoot for this goal? Can we shoot for this picture of the kingdom of God here on earth? God actively engages with His people and His people actively functions as a kingdom of priests.

This is what the Kingdom is all about and what God has put us here for. I ask us to take the coming Season of Lent seriously and apply ourselves and help us to get a little closer to the picture of God’s kingdom. Here is where we want to go; welcome to Lent!