

2nd Sunday of Lent 2014

Today, on the 2nd Sunday of Lent, the Christian community is invited to reflect on how change and transformation might affect us. The Roman Lectionary focuses on the dramatic change in the life of Abram as he was called by God to leave his homeland and extended family and go to a new, yet hitherto unknown, land where God would make of him a great nation. In the Gospel reading we hear about Jesus' transfiguration on a high mountain before the eyes of his disciples Peter, James and John. The Byzantine calendar remembers the great medieval mystical theologian of the Transfiguration, St. Gregory Palamas, and at the same time reminds us that while God is always the same and his years never end, the entire universe is in constant flux and change. Heaven and earth, the writer to the Hebrews tells us, "will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing* they will be changed."

So, the theme of the day seems to be about change and transformation and transfiguration. Seen in terms of the Lenten season, today's liturgy is calling us to think about what kind of change we need in our lives, how that might come about, and where it will take us. I would like to suggest that the fundamental change or transformation that we are called to during Lent is how our lives might better reflect the fact that we are baptized human beings. The entire Lenten journey is rooted in and orientated towards baptism- the great baptismal Vigil of Easter night when neophytes have, since the earliest days of the church, been plunged in the waters of baptism and united with the Passover mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. Everything in the church, everything during Lent, and, I would say, everything in life is really about remembering

that we are baptized, that we now belong to God and that we now belong to one another in the new community of the Messiah, the Body of Jesus.

Change in our lives as Christians is not intended to be haphazard. Change has a very clear goal- it happens when we are ready to hold up our lives before the mirror of our baptismal vows and then struggle to bring our lives ever more fully into line with the vision of life that these vows express. Lent, in particular, is about learning to live out the sacrament of our baptism day by day, so that we can enter a little more each time into the new life that baptism opens up for us. It's about allowing baptism more and more to become the mould that shapes our lives, until Christ lives in us and we live in Christ. It's about learning to enable baptism more and more to become the compass point from which we chart each day's course, until we grow into the full stature of Christ. This, I think, is what change and transformation are about in Christian life, and at their heart is the hard work of learning what it means to belong to God and to belong to one another in Jesus.

Now, I don't think this kind of transformation is easy. I don't think it ever has been easy because there are all kinds of things that stand in the way. Each generation and each age seems to have something in particular that blocks the change in life which the gospel calls for. There is often a particular lens, or a particular filter, or a particular mind-set, which each age or period of time has which more often than not works to blocks this transformation that would allow us to belong fully to God and to each other as a baptismal people. And because we're right in the midst of the age in which we live,

we often are nearly completely unaware of the lens, the filter, the mind-set that we actually are operating with. It's like the air we're breathing. It often remains hidden and unconscious, but it is still there and it is still very powerful in shaping the way we approach our life in the church. Let me give you an example from the past of what I mean before I suggest what our own fundamental problem is.

In the 4th century after Christianity had been legalized in the Roman Empire and was gradually becoming the religion of both state and society, the Church began to fill the gap left by the waning of the various pagan cults. She began to take on the function of blessing, of sanctioning, and of sanctifying the life of the empire. Her whole life, especially her liturgical life, began to reflect this new function. What had shaped her during the previous three hundred years- a sense of being the new community of the Messiah and the presence, the *parousia*, of God's Kingdom which was still to come- this earlier sense, was not lost or destroyed entirely, but what happened was that a new layer of piety- what is often called "mysteriological piety"- was simply put on top of things. This new mysteriological piety meant that the Christian liturgical cult increasingly came to be experienced as a kind of "thing-in-itself", something that by its very nature could sanctify life and could bring together the sacred and the profane dimensions of society. This shift was a huge change in the way people came to *experience* what it meant to be Christian and what it meant to be part of the Christian community. The earlier shape of Christian teaching and worship remained intact, but it now there was a new lens, a new filter, and a new mind-set through which people encountered Christianity and the gospel. This new piety, especially as it came to be

embedded in the liturgy, enabled the Christian community, in a sense, “to church the masses” of semi-pagans who were now streaming into the Church, but at the same time this new piety also lay the foundations for many of the distortions that would gradually emerge in the life of the Church during what we call the middle ages.

So, my question for us is this- what is our own lens, our own filter, the mind-set of our own time and age and location with which we function and which often shapes the way we approach Christian life and life in the Church? Now, each of us probably has her or his own particular lens and filter and mind-set, but I would suggest that there is also something big and over-arching that affects almost everything in the Church, but of which we are usually almost totally unaware. And this is our *consumerist approach to religion*. What I mean by this is that people often come to Church in order to *use* it as a way of satisfying some desire. Now, in and of itself, desire is not a bad thing, except when it means that I approach the Christian community only in order to take, to consume, to digest for my benefit alone. During the past nearly 30 years of being a priest, I have seen this over and over again. I don’t know how many times I have heard phrases like, “but I don’t get anything out of it”, or it “doesn’t satisfy what I want”. Or conversely, “Oh, I like this style of liturgy or I like that kind of music, or I don’t like the way they do things here”. Behind all of this stands the idea Church and Gospel are commodities, functions of the religious Marketplace. If I can’t find what I desire here, I’ll get it over there. This is the disease of what I would call *religious capitalism*, and we are all susceptible to it. There may indeed be times when we can no longer stay in the place where we are, but the question we then need to ask is where I can *best be yoked*

to God and to the Christian community, where I can *most fully belong* to God and to brothers and sisters in Jesus the Christ. The question we often ask, however, is “what can I get out of this for me?”. This is why we are far too often afraid to ask one another for real commitment and we’re afraid to call one another to accountability when we see one another treating the Christian community as if it were simply a commodity to be *used*. Before anybody is enrolled in a Christian community, in a parish, we should openly and directly ask them: And what will *you* contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ in this place? What will *you* give in terms of your time, your gifts, your treasure, your talents for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Jesus?

The degree to which we refuse to ask these questions and the degree to which we are satisfied with religious consumerism is the degree to which we are not allowing our community and our individual lives to stand before the mirror of our baptismal vows. A somewhat well-known economist of the 19th-century enunciated a principle that, I think, should be the spiritual motto and goal of every Christian community: “*From each according to his/her ability; to each according to their need.*” *That* is the dynamic of Christian life. And if we lived and acted that in way, the Church would burst open with energy and giving and life. Change and transformation are indeed hallmarks of the Lenten journey, and the biggest change and transformation that we need, I think, is to shed the religious consumerism that clings to all of us in various ways, to hold up all of our life to the mirror of our baptismal vows, and during this Lenten time day-by-day to remember that we are baptized into Christ, that we belong now to God, and that we belong to one another in the new community of the Messiah, the Body of Jesus.