

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The last sentences of our gospel reading for today: “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

We are coming to the end of the season of Lent. It is coming into view with next Sunday being the Sunday of the Passion, or Palm Sunday.

I love the Rev. Sally Heiligman, who had served in this diocese and was my personal mentor and champion toward my ordination. Some years ago, at the funeral service for her husband, Ed., The Rt. Rev. Daniel Herzog, the retired bishop of the Diocese of Albany, gave a sermon....telling us right away, as a reminder, that in these last two weeks of Lent, we will hear a lot about death. In our sermons, in our readings, as we climb the hill to Calvary and the cross with Jesus. And, true enough, we hear this theme today from the very lips of Jesus. Getting us ready for the days to come.

For this reason, as well as the focus on personal repentance, the greatest Christian celebration of baptism is not sanctioned in this season of Lent by the greater church. Baptism should be celebrated anytime, but not in this season of Lent.

And that makes sense, when you think about it. But, having prayed on it and listening for the echo in my heart, I hear and see a great preaching opportunity...all centered by the deepest, most loving, most intimate and passionate, sacramental rite known to the Church. The gifting of our greatest possible gift to God...the lifting up...the greatest heartfelt yearning in asking for God’s blessing and help in the receipt of our children...those we hold most dearly in our hearts.

In the Gospel reading today, I see the people of this parish, moving toward the finish line of Lent, walking with Jesus, coming toward Jerusalem, and the apparent end of it all. And here we are, in the company of some visiting Greeks. We hear them say to Philip, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Even though we do not celebrate baptisms in Lent, I ask you to open your prayer books for just a moment, and turn to Page 305. Look hard and long at those prayers at the bottom of the page. Now, turn to Page 308. “Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.”

How can I share with you, by my words, the intensity of my heart...the open vulnerability of my soul with the utterances of those prayers? How can I convey to your hearts the very core of existence, the very nature of our faith journey in these lives we are blessed with...by the power of those very words? In fact, the power of much of prayers within the baptismal rite itself?

For any chance of life with God, here and now in this lifetime when it really matters, we need to constantly pray for God's help to give us "an inquiring and discerning heart" because we cannot and will not do it on our own. It is THE original sin to think and believe that each one of us, individually, can make judgments on our own. That we, ourselves, can figure it all out. That we, ourselves, can make decisions based on our own values, our own leanings, our own preferences.

In praying for "an inquiring and discerning heart", we ask God's help to form us in order to move away from ourselves. "Save us, Jesus", from ourselves. From our Lord's prayer, "...lead us not into (the) temptation of thinking and believing that we are masters of anything, but deliver us from (the) evil of living apart from you..."

Each of us needs God's help to open up...all so that we can be like the visitors in today's gospel, saying to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Transformed in the heart by God, in order to have the desire, the passion, to "see Jesus".

See, it was no different then than it is now. Not everyone...in fact, almost no one, comparatively speaking is given...given by God...the heart to want to ask to "see Jesus". By way of comparison, let us look at these Greeks...and how we are, or are not, like them.

Jesus knew that these Greeks were probably Gentiles, Gentiles being the Jewish name for non-Jews, and they were fascinated by the antiquity of Judaism, and its profound ethical teaching. They were known as "God-fearers" and were numerous in the first century. Current scholarship concludes that they would have converted to Judaism had it not been for the requirement of circumcision. They were spiritual groupies, in a way. So it was in character for them, like the Jews, to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover...and also to be curious about this person they had heard about.

And now, finally, in the gospel of John, Jesus proclaims that the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified has come. Up to this point in this gospel, he performs miracles that John refers to as signs, but says in various ways that his "hour" or "time" has not yet come...until now. And, as he does so, the Greeks....and others within hearing, including us...come to realize that his idea of glory is way different than ours. And further, in asserting the stamp of approval of what Jesus is saying, there is heard a voice from heaven...which some heard as thunder, or even as an angel speaking.

What is the big deal here?

Jesus knows the Judaic prophesies. And, through the maturity that comes by growing into his adulthood, he is transformed...as we also have seen....from a state of knowing and recognizing his ministry, into a state of totally embracing his ministry. Actually living into it, so that he...as Jesus, becomes transformed, changed by the Spirit...into the Christ.

He says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if

it dies, it bears much fruit.” Here, in the United States, which has the deserved reputation of being the bread basket of the world, it all started with an initial kernel of wheat that had to be planted, or it otherwise would die without further notice or comment. When it was planted, it eventually sprouted and bore more grain, which themselves spout and bore even more, and on and on, leading to the billions of bushels that helps feed the world.

Death is a natural part of life...we all know that, on one level or another. And each of us can deal with death in unique ways. But the point is this: For us, “Glory”...or let us call it the overwhelming focus of all presence around us or within us... is about, what? What is Glory to us? It is about having more. Having more attention upon us. Or having more money, more prestige, more power, more possessions....like more trains in the basement.

But, for Jesus, what we hear as Glory...again, what I will call the overwhelming focus of all presence....is all....ALL...about God. God the Father. And he lived...and lives it...NOT in having more, but in giving more. Focus outward...not inward. Even to the point of giving himself on the cross.

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

I have read that the great temptation of preaching is to give our hearers something other than Jesus, to preach something other than the Gospel. “We would see Jesus,” our listeners plead, and we give them our learning, comments on the day’s news, a witty joke or two, but too often there is little of Jesus in our preaching. But it is not only preachers who do this. We all have that issue, and there are those around you who are looking for his presence.

Where is the presence of God in your ministry? We have been continually reminded through the centuries of God’s word that we are the very people of God, indeed made in the very image of God. But, what do we do with it? Put it on the shelf, like our other trophies, all in order to shine that attention upon ourselves? Or, do we follow Jesus...like the disciples we say that we are...by...not “doing”, but living..outward?

Your ministry is whatever you do that makes your heart glad, and your spirit rejoice. Maybe music. Or helping in a lunch program. Assisting with the liturgy of the service as acolyte, usher, altar guild member, and so on. Or whatever. Well, who is it for? Is it for yourself, so that it is a hobby? Just something else to do? Yet another activity to crowd into your calendar of preferences?

Or, do we follow the lead of Jesus? Like him, are we driven...joyfully and gladly...to give. Not take. But give. In other words, how much do you give to God...and I am not talking money. In what each of us does in daily life, do we do it for self-promotion or gain, or have we allowed our hearts to be transformed so, like Jesus, we give instead...give it all for the glory of God?

A few years ago, a rabbi at a large Reform synagogue published an editorial in the local newspaper on Christmas Day. He said, "I like Christmas, and I like Christians. My only problem with both is that they need more Jesus."

Sometimes those who are outside the circle of the church can see and name our problems far better than we can. We all need a lot more Jesus. It is not only a problem for preachers; it's a problem for every one of us who are called by the name of Christian.

"Sir, we would see Jesus". All around us are people who want to see Jesus. But, before we dare to try to be the persons who project Jesus to the rest of the world, we first need to do this: we need to empty our hearts and actually say to God, "Sir, I first would see Jesus." Only then, if we have the heart, the nerve, and the faith, to sit at his feet, let him heal us, feed upon his broken body, and follow him through the cross...will we be able to continue. May each one of us be touched by God, through our life journeys, to have the heart, the nerve and the faith.

Then we can say...not as a prayer of intercession, but as a prayer of joyful thanksgiving that we are living in the glory of the loving God, as the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.