Homily: Second Sunday of Lent (yr. B, 2024)

As you may already know, the Renaissance painter Raphael produced many religious masterpieces. Notable among these is his remarkable painting of the Transfiguration. According to the critics, it’s a magnificent contrast of light and darkness, with a radiant Glorified CHRIST. There’s also something unusual about the painting. Toward the bottom, below the Transfigured CHRIST there’s a sick child surrounded by anxious people. What does the sick child have to do with the Transfiguration? According to the scholars, everything. Raphael’s painting is a lesson in Scripture study. Every narrative of Scripture is to be read in the context of the total story. In each gospel, immediately after the Transfiguration, CHRIST cures a sick child. Raphael placed that sick child in the painting of the Transfigured CHRIST because the Glory of CHRIST is shared by the sick child. Again, according to the scholars, Raphael’s message is similar to the message of today’s Gospel; the Glory of GOD is revealed in our weaknesses, symbolized by the sick child, as well as in our strengths. If you haven’t already noticed; the Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent is always the Temptations of CHRIST, the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Lent is always the Transfiguration. Some might wonder what the Transfiguration has to do with Lent. Wouldn’t it belong more to the Easter Season? in each of the four gospels, the Narrative of the Transfiguration though, is sandwiched between two predictions CHRIST makes of HIS Passion and Death. Could there be a message here? For most Christian Theologians and Scripture Scholars, there definitely is. Don’t we say the beauty of the Transfiguration and the burden and suffering of the Cross can be understood only in terms of each other? The Transfiguration occurs in the Gospel story just when the Disciples are realizing JESUS is a Messiah quite a bit different from their expectations and what they’ve been taught. HE, HIMSELF, makes clear, HE won’t be a Military General Victoriously chasing out the Romans. HE will definitely come to Glory; but only after HE has suffered a cruel Passion and Death. Placing the Transfiguration at this crucial time in the Faith of the Disciples reveals not only the meaning of the Cross for JESUS, but the meaning of the Cross for HIS Disciples. And it reminds us of something very important as we face our own hardships and trials. Our sufferings are not meaningless. They are all a share in the sufferings of CHRIST, which are inseparable from HIS Glory. Our sufferings are also a part of CHRIST’S Glory, as the sick child is part of the Transfiguration in the Painting by Raphael. Once again, according to the scholars, the Transfiguration is presented against the backdrop of the predictions of the Death of CHRIST because GOD reveals HIMSELF to us, and is with us, in our sufferings, as well as in our joys. We come to know GOD not only in success but also in pain or sorrow. In other words, GOD is just as present to a family at a burial, as at a Baptism, at a wake, as at a wedding. Many say actually; that they have come to experience GOD more deeply when confined to a hospital bed than when confidently living in good health; and they found the meaning of life more in their struggle with suffering than in their times of strength. Don’t misunderstand that, however. This doesn’t mean we prove our worth by stoically bearing our hardships. As one author put it; human suffering is not bad tasting medicine for the cure of the soul. Christianity doesn’t glorify suffering.... Christianity doesn’t glorify suffering..... We pray, in fact, that GOD will deliver us from illness and all the other burdens of life. And as I’ve told you before; CHRIST came curing our illnesses; our physical as well as our spiritual illnesses. Illness and pain were NOT GOD’s ideas; but came as a result of Adam and Eve’s tragic decision. But we do see; in the inevitable and inescapable hardships of life, a special presence of GOD. Whether it be a migraine headache or a malignant tumor, arthritis or angina, GOD Reveals HIMSELF to us and is present to us in such trials but there’s no question about it, suffering is a mystery; but Christianity insists GOD Reveals HIS Glorious Presence in the Mystery of the Cross. We would say it like this; suffering is NOT a means to glory; rather, glory is revealed in suffering. Suffering is NOT a means to glory; rather, glory is revealed in suffering. Raphael died tragically at the tender age of thirty-seven. In his short life, he painted many religious masterpieces including some of the finest Nativities, Madonnas, and Crucifixions. But in his will, he requested that only one of his paintings be placed over his coffin; and the painting he selected was his Transfiguration, with the sick child below the Glorified CHRIST. So, if you haven’t already noticed, the JESUS of the Gospel comes with a very heavy price. The Glorious CHRIST of the Transfiguration will soon become the Crucified CHRIST of Good Friday. Accepting the GOD of Blessing is easy, but when that same GOD calls us to give readily and humbly to others or to forgive one another without limit or condition, to imitate HIS SON in Giving up and Pouring out, we begin to realize the price of Discipleship; we definitely recognize the need for more prayer, more fasting or detachment, more almsgiving or charity. Last week, we began the Annual Catholic Appeal. An important way in the Diocese of San Diego to respond to the call of that GOD who calls us to give readily and humbly to others. Pouring ourselves out isn’t always easy, there’s a price to be paid no doubt; but as Christians we believe we are building our Mansions in Heaven precisely through our generosity and surrender; so, while I can’t necessarily show you a visible result or reward in this life, the Transfiguration proclaims loud and clear, a fulfillment is coming in the next. United in CHRIST we are being called to pool our resources together and support those programs that are so vital to so many in the Diocese. Today, in the Reading from Genesis, we were also given the example of Abraham. Abraham’s Faith flickered and almost failed when he thought GOD was calling him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. As we can all imagine, it must have been a very painful and confusing time. But Abraham Trusted GOD. And GOD didn’t let him down. GOD blessed him beyond his wildest dreams. So, in considering donating to the Annual Catholic Appeal I ask you to trust GOD even if you’re hesitating, even if you don’t want anything to do with it. GOD will bless any amount of generosity. Whatever you give, according to the late Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, you become an agent of transfiguration, you are working with GOD to bring more compassion into the world, more laughter and joy into the world, more togetherness. As we work together to make the Annual Catholic Appeal a success once again in this parish of St. Louise de Marillac, may we discover within ourselves that transfiguring compassion that through GOD’S Grace so many needs will be transfigured and transformed into the bright light of hope. Again, as I told you last week, envelopes are in the pews or on the table at the back of church. You can either make a one-time donation, or you can make a pledge that you pay off throughout the year. Thank you for helping proclaim the Gospel in San Diego. And thank you for ultimately supporting your parish family; again, once we reach our assessment of 11,500 dollars, anything collected by the Diocese after that, will return to the parish. As I’ve said in the past, I’ll say it again, we depend heavily on those rebates, they definitely get us through the year.... What the Disciples saw in JESUS on the mountain was the Divinity - the very Life and Love of GOD - that dwelt within HIM. That same Life and Love of GOD lives within each one of us as well; calling us beyond our own needs, wants and interests. Love that calls us beyond ourselves is transforming and will transfigure not only our lives but the lives of all those around us and all those who need and depend on us. With the Transfigured JESUS may we take up our Cross with HIM to Jerusalem as we continue our journey through the Lenten desert, turning despair into hope, sadness into joy, anguish into healing, estrangement into community.