

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC March 8, 2020
Lent 2nd Sunday of Year A Mt 17: 1-8

In this morning's Gospel we find Jesus on the mountaintop, radiant with a light, an energy, a luminosity that is indeed awesome. The scene is reminiscent of Moses on Mount Sinai, but here Jesus is the new Moses; and, like Moses before Him, the face of Jesus is said to shine intensely. A cloud covers the mountain, a luminous cloud, the symbol of God's presence, and here again, as on Mount Sinai, God speaks from the cloud. The three tents that Peter wants to set up recall the temporary shelters that the Hebrews erected on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, commemorated by the Jews in the Feast of Booths. Moses and Elijah, conversing with Jesus, represent the Torah and the Prophets, each finding their fulfillment in Jesus. The scene is rich with symbolism, metaphor and mystery, and there is much that can be said about the whole scene. It might be best, though, to look not at the big picture but to concentrate on just a single phrase, the words spoken by the Father to Peter, James and John, "Listen to Him." We might ourselves this morning how do we listen? In the most elemental way, how do we listen to one another; how do we listen to Jesus, and how do we listen to God present in the world around us?

Listening to another, really listening, is not easy. Most of our conversations are not conversations at all. Either they are monologues, i.e., we wait patiently till someone has finished speaking; we wait until they pause and "come up for air," as politeness demands, and then we say exactly what we were going to say, as if they had not spoken at all. Or, our conversations are debates. In this case we do listen, but only to catch the inept word or false phrase, at which we can then proceed to pounce, to intercept and destroy. To listen is to give ourselves totally, for the moment or for that hour, to another; to try to put ourselves into another's mind, into another's heart. It is the attempt to hear not simply words, but to hear that person.

The problem is that to listen is to take a risk. It takes our precious time, often when we think we can least afford it; taking on another's problems, when we have enough of our own. It means getting involved, if we really try to listen, to open ourselves to our spouses, our children, our co-workers, our friends. If we are good listeners, we may fear people will "dump" on us—and there's just so much we can take. Listening can be an act of love, an act of generosity. When someone comes to us who wants to talk, what we can offer is not necessarily a bag full of answers, but ourselves. We can simply be there for that person. We enter that conversation with our own anxieties, our own ignorance, our own insufficiencies, but in listening we give a part of ourselves. That is the task of a Christian—just to be there where someone reaches out

to us.

Secondly, we are told to listen to Jesus. Why? Because He is the One who embodies the infinite God; He is God's window upon the world. He is like a grace-filled "Rosetta Stone," enabling us to decipher all the conflicting desires, longings and fears of the human heart. In all of His deeds, His gestures, His words, His comings and goings, the way He deals with people, we catch a different sense of who God is than that which we might first be inclined to imagine. The God whom Jesus reveals is not the authoritarian, judgmental, patriarchal figure we may have constructed in our minds out of all those godlike people we have known since childhood. He is instead the compassionate, empowering, reconciling Presence that is at the heart of all reality. When we hear the Gospel proclaimed to us from week to week, and if we really try to listen, if we try to match our story to Jesus' story, then His words can have an immediacy and an authenticity unmatched by any other figure in human history.

Finally, how do we listen to God and the world around us? As true as it is that God speaks to us through the Scriptures, truer still is it that the God is not imprisoned in a book, even a book of God's own inspiration. God is continually speaking to us; the problem may be that we have become deaf to His voice. God speaks to us through the things God has created, the magnificence of the universe in which we dwell, As the Psalmist says, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims His handiwork. Day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge." We hear God speak in the voices of the poor and the disenfranchised who cry out for our help.

Today's Gospel invites us to look beyond appearances. Just as Peter, James and John were allowed to see in Jesus more than an itinerant rabbi, more than a miracle worker, more than an inspiring teacher, but the ineffable presence of God's own self, so we are invited to behold that there is a divine purpose, inspiration and movement within and behind so much of what we take for granted in our everyday lives. Let that be the reason for our thanksgiving as we enter into our Eucharist today.