

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18; Psalm 116 (115); Romans 8:31-34; Mark 9:2-10

This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!

Mark 9:2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Mark 9:9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. 10 So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This story is found in the first three Gospels, but not in the fourth, that of John. Each Gospel writer tells it in a subtly different way according to the theology of the writer and the needs of the community at the time. Thus for instance, in Luke it becomes a moment of prayer, in Matthew, an apocalyptic vision. In Mark, it is a kind of theophany, specifically a Christophany.

KIND OF WRITING

What kind of story is this? Although the Transfiguration is reported only once (Mt and Lk get it from Mark and the

“report” in 2 Peter 1:17-18 seems to be from the late 90s or the early 100s), it belongs to a recognisable type of story of which there are many examples in the OT and a few examples in the NT. This genre is that of the appearance of a god (= theophany; e.g. Is 6 or Num 12).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There are significant associations with Moses and Elijah. Such associations may be traced ultimately to two promises regarding God’s future intervention.

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. (Mal. 5:4)

In the same way, Moses was expected at the end:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. (Deut 18:15)

Moses

Then Moses *went up* on the *mountain*, and the *cloud* covered the *mountain*. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the *cloud* covered it for *six days*; on the seventh day he called to Moses *out of the cloud*. Now the *appearance* of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the *mountain* in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and *went up* on the mountain. Moses was on the *mountain* for forty days and forty nights. (Ex 24:15-18)

Moses *came down* from Mount Sinai. As he *came down* from the *mountain* with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face *shone* because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw



Thought for the day

We live in a very noisy, busy world, a culture marked by constant distraction. Even at the ordinary level of relationship, attending to the other—really hearing him or her—is a challenge. It happens when we choose to make space, to shut out the other noises and graciously attend to each other. Something similar may be said of the life of the spirit. To listen to the Son happens when we choose it and, in a practical way, create spaces in our lives for such encounters.

Prayer

Revealer God, you open your heart to us in your Son Jesus. Help us to open our hearts to you, as we contemplate your living word. May the Scriptures be for us a place of true encounter and may we, hearers of the Word, listen with our hearts and lives to him, the Word made flesh.

Moses, the skin of his *face* was *shining*, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (Ex 34:29-35)

This association with the veil must have been a significant one for early Christians, given that it is found in 2 Corinthians 3:7ff. and Matthew 17:2. There is likewise a reference to face in Rev. 1:16

In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and

his face was like the sun shining with full force.

Elijah

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” He said, “Go out and stand on the *mountain* before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his *face* in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a *voice* to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:9-13)

We see that our story is really an explosion of associations with Moses and Elijah. However, the basic reference is to Exodus 24 - which echoes the motifs of 6 days, master, three disciples, mountain, cloud, vision and hearing. The point of the story here is what the “daughter of a voice” says: this is my beloved Son—words of commendation as Jesus begins his journey of suffering. Matthew later on picks up the detail of the face shining.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Within the Gospel of Mark, there is a strong connection with the Baptism of Jesus: And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11)

(ii) This Gospel is structured in two parts: effectively, 1-8, beginning with the Baptism scene and ending with the confession of Peter; 9-16, likewise beginning with the Transfiguration scene and containing a great deal of teaching on disci-

pliship, especially in chapters 8-10.

(iii) Specifically at this point in the Gospel, the evangelist begins to teach that the Messiah must suffer (with a linked teaching on discipleship). The Transfiguration is offered as an anticipation of the resurrection, a kind of first instalment to offer the disciples grounds for hope in the face of the Cross.

ST PAUL

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1Corinthians 15:8-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 2-3 Six days = from Exodus; these three disciples form an inner circle, but one which exemplifies radical misunderstanding of the project of Jesus and even gross failure. The change in appearance signifies that they caught a glimpse of the transcendent identity of Jesus. This was an event beyond imagination (hence “whiter”).

Verse 4 Both these figures were symbols that the time of the messiah had come. Furthermore, in Mark’s gospel they represent the church from Judaism (Moses) and the church from the Gentiles (Elijah). Unlike in Luke’s version, we are not told the topic of conversation—it too is beyond us.

Verses 5-6 Peter in this Gospel often fails to understand and this seems to be the case here. He wishes to hold on to the experience (in a tent!). However, “it is good to be here” invites reflection. Then Mark explains away his blurring by saying “he did not know what to say”. The terror here is not, so to speak, psychological but ontological: it is the proper awe before the numinous (cf. Rudolf Otto’s expression the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, from *The Idea of the Holy*).

Verse 7 A cloud is a frequent symbol of the divine presence in the Old Testament, probably because a cloud both reveals and conceals. God recognises, so to speak, the Son and invites profound listening.

Verse 8 As usual in these stories, the experience is elusive, ending as unexpectedly as it began.

Verses 9-10 The “messianic secret” is a *leitmotiv* in Mark, probably building on Jesus’ own caution about his identity, but taking it further as a means of account for the lack of recognition of Jesus among his own people. The language of “Son of Man” and “resurrection” make the links to Good Friday and Easter Sunday explicit: this is an experience which will be understood only in retrospect.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When have I really felt, spontaneously and deeply, “it is good to be here”. Was this moment of grace also a confirmation of yourself in some way?
2. There is a sense in which life is always “on the move” and we cannot freeze even special moments. They do continue to influence us, but are not under our control. This is the mystery of human relationship and of our relationship with the Mystery.
3. Listening and being listened to are necessary but perhaps all too rare human experiences. What have I learned about listening which can help me “listen to him”? The words of Augustine come to mind: “You called, shouted, you broke through my deafness” (Confessions 10.27.38).

PRAYER

Ever-faithful God, you were well pleased with Abraham’s obedience and you accepted the sacrifice of your son, who gave himself up for the sake of us all.

Train us by Christ’s teaching and school us in his obedience that as we walk his way of sacrifice we may come to share in your glory.

We ask this through Christ, our deliverance and hope, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, holy and mighty God for ever and ever. Amen.

Lent 1	Genesis 9:8-15	Noah	Ps 25 (24)	1 Peter 3:18-22	Mark 1:12-15
Lent 2	Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 14-18	Abraham	Ps (116) 115	Rom 8:31-34	Mark 9:2-10
Lent 3	Exodus 20:1-17	Moses	Ps (19) 18	1 Cor 1:22-25	John 2:13-25
Lent 4	2 Chron 36:14-16, 19-23	Exile	Ps 137 (136)	Eph 2:4-10	John 3:14-21
Lent 5	Jeremiah 31:31-34	New Covenant	Ps 51 (50)	Heb 5:7-9	John 12:20-33

God did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for us all

Rom 8:31 What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is the one who will condemn? Christ is the one who died (and more than that, he was raised), who is at the right hand of God, and who also is interceding for us.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The image of “son” runs across all three readings today in an intriguing way. As happens in Lent, the middle reading functions as a kind of bridge, this time taking the idea of “giving up” from the Abraham story and looking forward to the presentation of the Son in the transfiguration story with the words “This is my Son, the beloved.” For Lent, it all serves to put the figure and destiny of Jesus to the fore and not simply his teaching.

KIND OF WRITING

The final verses of Romans 5-8 function as a kind of conclusion (*peroratio*), using rhetorical questions to engage the hearers. In the course of the four chapters, Paul has marvellously paraded before the Roman Christians all the astonishing gifts of grace in Christ: salvation, faith, baptism, discipleship (with all its difficulties), God as Abba, the Holy Spirit who helps us in our weakness and finally unshakeable hope in Christ, from whom nothing will separate us. The order is chronological, making it easy to follow. To help us further, Paul has framed the whole argument with two terrific reflections: Rom 5:1-5 and 8:31-39. Paul often ends a line of argument with insistent, brief imperatives (*staccato* style). Here, the whole final chapter becomes poetic, raising the emotional engagement with a series of rhetorical questions. (In vv. 31-39 there are seven such questions; it is even possible that vv. 33b and 34b could also be questions.) Throughout the message is: with all these gifts in common, surely we can tolerate a degree of difference over issues which are simply not on the same level?

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

In brief, the context in the community is

a harmful split between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. The issue common: how much difference can we tolerate and still be in communion? Romans is in four grand sections:

1-4: all equally in need of Christ's grace
5-8: all equally heirs of Christ's grace
9-11: Jews and Gentiles in God's plan
12-15: How to tolerate differences and still be in communion.

RELATED PASSAGES

Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God's glory. Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed—namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. *For there is no distinction*, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:21-23)

For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Romans 10:12-13)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 31 The first rhetorical question opens a series in which possible arguments *against* our security in Christ are rehearsed only to be denied by Paul. The phrase “for us” is part of Paul's understanding of salvation in Christ (cf. 5:6-8; 14:15; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14-15, 21; Gal 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; 1 Thess 5:10). The implied response to the second rhetorical questions is “no one.” At this point in his life, Paul too needs this reassurance because he is on his way to Jerusalem, a risky and dangerous mission, bring the collection, a symbol of

union between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

Verse 32 However disturbing it may be for us, Paul is really saying God went one further than Abraham and actually gave his son. The rhetorical question is really an *a fortiori* argument, that is, an argument from something stronger. “If God gave the very best of what he had, other gifts will follow.” Freely give is, in Greek, a single verb, “to grace.” Cf. Rom 5:6-10. The idea of inheritance, present in Romans 8, is implied as well.

Verse 33 The charge is not a human “case” but God looking at sinners. Given that the judge has already acquitted everyone, no charge stands a chance. 33b could be an ironic question: *Is it God, who justifies?* Of course not! With this verse, we are back in the courtroom of Romans 1-4.

Verse 34 Again using forensic language, the expected reply is no one. 34b is an affirmation giving the reason for this reply. It just might also be an ironic question: *Is it Jesus, the one who died (and more than that, he was raised) etc.* Again, of course not! The forensic imagery includes Jesus as an advocate on our behalf in heaven. Cf. Heb 7:25, 9:24; 1 John 2:1. On the whole verse, cf. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For God achieved what the law could not do because it was weakened through the flesh. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and concerning sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.* (Romans 8:1, 3)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. From time to time, our feeling of security in Christ can be shaken—then we need to go back to Romans 8!
2. Our tradition used to emphasize sin a great deal and God as a dreadful judge and yet here in Romans we see the judge himself is on our side. Let us come before the throne of grace with confidence!
3. In the end, it all goes back to the love of God, astonishing in its depth and breadth. Our role is simply to allow ourselves to be so loved, “love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.”

PRAYER

Your throne of judgment has become for us the mercy seat of your compassionate and forgiving love. Give us the faith to let ourselves be so loved by you; let us be confident in your forgiveness; help us in turn to be loving disciples of your Son, who gave himself for us all.

God said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”

Gen 22:1 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”

Gen 22:9 When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 12 He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” 13 And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Gen 22:15 The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, 18 and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” 19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS.

The story has always disturbed people and so it ought! At an initial level, the account of full of suppressed emotion. In the phrase of a great commentator, it is “fraught with background” as if the intensity of emotion could not bear expression. What then is it about? Is it about the ending of human sacrifice and its replacement with animal offerings? Is it a cult legend for the Israelite Temple

in Jerusalem (Mt Moriah = the Holy of Holies, a later understanding from 2 Chron 3:1)? Is it a personal test of Abraham’s faith (the tenth test, in Rabbinic counting)? Or is it a reflection of the regular experience of the Israelite, according to which faithfulness to God seems to bring the risk of extinction, in frequent deportations? The origin of the story may well be different from its final use and purpose.

KIND OF WRITING

Gen 22 is a short story of frightening intensity and tension. In terms of content, the intensity is built upon the immorality of the story and the theological contradiction of God commanding the execution of the promised, long-awaited and God-given heir, Isaac. In terms of style, much of the power of the tale comes from the ironies, both in the narration and in the dialogue (noted in the commentary below).

The plots of short stories are often multi-layered and this is a striking example. It is a plot of action, in which a potential tragic outcome is averted by the technique of surprise (the angel). It is a plot of character—Abraham does pass the text. But it is also a plot of knowledge—God learns (!) about the faith of Abraham and Abraham learns about God (!).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

In the Jewish tradition, the Binding is a climax: the tenth test and the seventh blessing. In the Christian tradition, it is read as an allegory of the sacrifice of Jesus, who carried the wood of sacrifice.

RELATED PASSAGES

On human sacrifice see Ex 22:29; Ex 34:20 and Lev 18:21.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The reader knows more than Abraham, thus becoming an observer.

Verse 2 Notice the emotional insistence, in contrast to the suppressed emotion of Abraham. The logistic and journey are recounted impersonally.

Verse 4 A time lapse is passed over in silence. Abraham and Isaac head off alone. Ironically, he tells the truth when he says (apparently lying) “We will come back”. The burdening of Isaac is aston-

ishingly poignant.

Verse 7 The unbearable emotion almost spills over in the forms of address between father and son.

Verse 8 Again, Abraham’s evasion ironically (and unknowingly) predicts the outcome of the test.

Verses 9-10 The moment of greatest terror, told again with chilling objectivity.

Verse 11 The surprise entry of the angel resolves the tension.

Verse 14 A pun in Hebrew on the word Moriah, from the verb “to see.”

Verse 15 The change from God (Elohim) to Lord (YHWH) alerts us that this addition is part of the covenant theology of the Yahwist, stitched into the Abraham story at this point, to link the stories of the ancestors with the later, exilic theology of covenant.

Verse 16 The emotional language of the start is replayed.

Verse 17 The covenant promise is given again.

Verse 19 The laconic coming to rest of the drama is in keeping with the tone throughout.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. From time to time in our lives, our faith is really tested and may seem counter to good sense and even to what is right. Go back in your own life to times like that: what kept you going? Did you grow as a result? Did it leave a mark on your faith? Prayer of faithfulness.

2. When have you been asked to give up or let go of something very, very dear to you? How did you come through the experience? Prayer of letting go.

3. A conviction that “all will be well” in the words of Julian of Norwich is also part of our faith. This is what St Paul is writing about in the last verses of Romans 8. It doesn’t mean complacency at all, but it does mean real hope based on faith. Have you come to such realisation in your own journey? Prayer of hope.

PRAYER

God of all mystery, you lead us through life even when we cannot see where we are going. In those moments when all we can do is trust in you, let your Spirit assure our spirit that you are always with us, even to the end of the age.

THE LITURGY

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18; Psalm 116 (115); Romans 8:31-34; Mark 9:2-10

THEMES ACROSS THE READINGS

The central message of the Transfiguration is in the words, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9:7). Furthermore, Jesus’ own death is implied in the affirmation at the end about the resurrection. As a result, the Abraham story prepares us for two elements of Gospel account. However, on this Sunday, the excerpt from St Paul forms the real bridge between the first and third readings.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The Psalm matches the reading very closely. “I kept my faith, even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted.” (Psalms 116:10)

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

Abraham is for Jews and Christians the man of faith, often called “our father in faith”. In the biblical story, this faith is frequently tested and never more so than in the story we are about to hear. Even though Abraham “passes” the test, the story bristles with difficulties and remains very challenging for hearers today, both Jews and Christians.

Second reading

Romans 8:31-34

The challenge of the first reading sets us up for a shock in the second reading. God’s astonishing love for us is measured by a comparison with Abraham: Abraham was not asked, in the end, to give up his only son, but God did give up his only Son...so much does he love us.

Gospel

Mark 9:2-10

We all have our moments of spiritual experiences and so did Jesus, as we are about to hear. The core message for us today, however, comes from the voice the cloud, a great invitation.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 26 February

Daniel 9:4-10

Daniel prays a great prayer which we could make our own today. The Psalm takes up the same theme of forgiveness.

Luke 6:36-38

Pardon is free from God — but it is truly “ours” only when we pardon in return.

Tuesday 27 February

St Gregory of Narek, abbot and doctor

Isaiah 1:10, 16-20

Following an opening command to wash and make ourselves clean, no fewer than seven imperatives help us to think practically of changes in our lives.

Matthew 23:1-12

Matthew is aware that religious leaders can “lose the run of themselves,” as we say. This is true in our Gospel of the Pharisees, but the the Gospel goes on to issue a warning also to Christian leaders: they are not to be called rabbi or father or teacher. Why is that the case?

Wednesday 28 February

Jeremiah 18:18-20

Jeremiah, an unwilling prophet, had a tough time fulfilling his ministry, with many threats and even landing in jail. His story anticipates the passion of Jesus.

Matthew 20:17-28

The sons of Zebedee have overstepped the mark, but it’s a bit rich of the others to be indignant because they are really no different. Christian leadership, rooted in the person and practice of Jesus, simply must be service *and nothing else*.

Thursday 29 February

Jeremiah 17:5-10

As often in the Bible, a choice is placed before us. As the last paragraph is aware, the human heart can be (very!) perverse.

Luke 16:19-31

The story of the rich man (*Dives* in Latin) and the poor man, Lazarus, is unique to this Gospel. The point is pretty clear and it would be hard to miss the message. The exploration of the parable in the last paragraph, however, is larded

with irony...are we among those who would not be convinced even if *someone* (who?) should rise from the dead?

Friday 1 March

St David, bishop

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28

The ordinary mass goer might well ask why this reading and what is it about? The story of the rejection of Joseph by his brothers is interesting and significant of itself. Today, however, it is told to anticipate a similar rejection in the Gospel, the rejection of Jesus and his mission. In the case of Joseph, the rejected one became the saviour when there was a famine in the land of Canaan. Likewise, the rejected Jesus became a saviour but not merely to one family but to the whole human race.

Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

In the Old Testament, there are passages which talk about Israel as God’s vineyard, a metaphor which undergirds today’s parable. The parable on the lips of Jesus may have been simpler. The version we have in the Gospel reflects the context of Matthew’s community and the later application of Psalms to Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

Saturday 2 March

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

Today we hear a great prayer for forgiveness, a confident prayer because the Lord is our shepherd. It would make a terrific reflection on God’s mercy and compassion. It does prepare us to hear with fresh ears the parable of the prodigal son.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

As often, it can be hard to hear what is so familiar so that we are addressed again, so a special effort is needed. It might be good to focus on the stay-at-home brother and his resentments. Do I find such flinty resistance in myself? In my community? In our society? Even as we find this in ourselves, it is good to recall that the parable ends *without* resolution, open-ended, so that forgiveness and compassion are always possible.