

**Proper 16A (Pentecost 12)**

**Sunday, August 23, 2020**

**Sunday Said Mass at the High Altar**

**by the Reverend James Ross Smith**

*Romans 8:35–39; Psalm 78:14–25; Matthew 14:13–21*

*“Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood did not reveal that to you but my father in heaven.”*

Today I would like to struggle with you to try to make sense of what it means for us to *see*—sometimes to see clearly in moments of vision, clarity and insight; and sometimes to *try* to see, because that’s all we’re able to do, in moments of darkness, uncertainty; and confusion; and sometimes to see paradoxically, upside-down, foolishly, but nonetheless truly: God on the cross, life in the midst of death, dying and yet rising.

Human beings are not cameras. We do not scan the world, objectively and coolly, as if we weren’t involved. We are in the world. We are part of it. We are always involved, one way or another. We do not simply record. We see, we look, we interpret, and we make decisions about what we’ve seen. It’s how human beings have survived all these many thousands of years.

We are human beings, not cameras, so we don’t see everything. I’ve lived with a man for forty years. We

can stand in front of a portrait and I can ask, “What do you see?” and it turns out that it’s never exactly what I see. I see the face. He sees the face and everything else. He cares about design, shape, and structure. He sees how the face fits into the whole picture. I keep looking at the face. He’s an architect. I’m a priest. We are who we are.

We see things differently. Maybe that’s why we are social beings. We need each other because nobody can see, or understand, everything. Still, we do share this: human beings look, see, interpret, and wonder about the meaning of things, because that’s what we were created for. That’s what I believe. We were made to seek God and to discover that God is the meaning of things, that God is seeking *us*. It’s just that not everybody knows that or can believe it. And none of us, I think, knows it all the time. That’s why we spend a lot of time looking for things that are not God, because we are afraid and then we decide that we need to replace God, which seldom works out very well.

At the center of today’s gospel is a moment of seeing. This moment—it is Peter’s moment—emerges out of the usual confusion and uncertainty. “Who do people say that I am?”, Jesus asks. The disciples respond as if they were summarizing the latest poll results—John the Baptist, Elijah, maybe even Jeremiah or one of the

other prophets. But Jesus presses on, “OK. But who do *you* say that I am?” What do you see? What do you think? What do *you* believe? And Peter answers decisively, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” which is to say “You are not just another pretender or a fake. God is not like the dead, mute idols the Gentiles put in their temples. God lives. God *is* life. You are God’s son.”

Because of this moment’s drama, it is easy to think of Peter’s declaration as a breakthrough, the first of its kind, but it isn’t quite. Earlier, in chapter fourteen of Matthew’s gospel, the disciples are in a boat, rowing laboriously westward across the Sea of Galilee, when they see Jesus coming toward them, walking on the water. Peter, ever impetuous, tries to go to Jesus. He loses heart, flounders, and begins to sink. Jesus reaches out a strong hand, grabs him, saves him, and brings him back into the boat. “Why did you doubt?” Jesus asks, and the disciples, not just Peter, bow in worship and respond with faith, “Truly, you are the Son of God.”

And so, what we are seeing in this part of Matthew’s gospel is a gradual, but insistent, unveiling of the truth that was revealed at the very beginning of Matthew’s gospel: Jesus is Emmanuel, “God with us.”

And this unveiling, this *apocalypsing*, this revealing, is about Jesus, not about the disciples. Peter plays a central role here, not because he is being marked out for future glory. In this passage, Peter is important because he sees God's glory in the face of Jesus, and he says so. But Matthew does not tell us this to ask us to believe in Peter. He gives us Peter because of Peter's faith. He wants us, like Peter, to believe in Jesus. He wants us to look and to see, like Peter did, so that, like Peter, we might see and then say, "*Look*, the glory of God!" How beautiful was that moment of insight, that moment of vision, that witnessing of the glory of God.

But the thing is, God's glory is complicated, and we don't see the way God sees.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the great English writer, born an Anglican, a convert to Roman Catholicism, a Jesuit priest, a teacher of the classics, a sometimes anguished and unhappy man, is one of the great poets of the glory of God. It was given to him to see God's glory in unexpected places. In his poem, "Pied Beauty,"—"pied" means varied, multicolored—he sees God, not monochromatically in supposedly perfect things. He sees God in textures, patterns, variety, and color. He writes:

Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.

How funny—to see God in freckles! How wonderful to see God at work in a rainbow trout. This is seeing. This is vision. And it is beautiful. You want to linger there, like Peter, James, and John did after they witnessed Jesus, glorious and transfigured.

But, the thing is, Gerard Manley Hopkins wasn't able to linger there either. He couldn't hold on to the vision. Because he was human and because his life was sometimes hard, and because he was flawed and fragile like the rest of us; and so, sometimes, he writes out of the darkness, God's glory suddenly become invisible. He writes

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man  
In me ór, most weary, cry “I can no more.” I can;  
Can *something*, hope, wish day come, *not* choose *not* to be.

In this poem, God seems to have disappeared, the glory is gone. There is only the poet, sitting in darkness, trying to see, but not seeing, but, still, insisting on hope, insisting on life, *not* choosing *not* to be, which we might think of as the modern condition, which we might think of as our condition in the present moment, when there is so much pain, so much anxiety, and so little certainty. And, so, we might be tempted to say that as the vision of God's glory fades, the following question must surely arise, "Why has God abandoned us?" But that is not exactly Matthew's vision, and it is not even Mark's. Because all the evangelists write their gospels to tell us, along with Saint Paul, that sometimes God's glory is *foolish* glory. Sometimes God's glory seems to us to be ugly, because it comes to us out of the midst of pain and suffering, because sometimes it comes to us as sacrifice and love, love even to the point of death.

The lectionary does a strange thing to us this week and next. This week Peter sees, proclaims, and is praised for his proclamation. Everything is clear and glorious. Peter believes and by extension the church is granted the power to interpret Jesus's words and commandments, to bind and to loose. And it would be nice if we could stop there

But there is more to this story as we will see and hear next week, when Jesus turns and rebukes Peter, “Get behind me Satan, you are a hindrance to me.”

We must wait till next week to hear why Jesus does this. In the meantime, we might consider the words of Father John Behr, an Orthodox theologian, who writes of this passage, “One might say that Satan is the one who gets between Christ and the Cross.” And we might ask ourselves, why is this terrible place, this foot of the cross also holy and sacred ground, a place not to be transgressed, a moment not to be denied or prevented, this Christ saying yes to the Cross? What do we see there? How can something so ugly be so beautiful? How is God insistently, gloriously present to us, loving us, right there, in the middle of suffering, *Christ on the Cross?*

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