

Second Sunday of Lent: With Jesus, the Victory is Ours

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 33:4-5,18-19,20,22; 2 Timothy 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9

Dear CCST family and friends,

Our Lord Jesus is always glorious whether hungry, misunderstood, mobbed by the crowd, abandoned, or dying on the cross, which his disciples could not often see. His being glorious in all circumstances is founded in his obedience, love, and union with the Father, which is shared with those who follow him. This is the source of strength that St. Paul mentioned in his letter to Timothy; the strength from above to bear the hardship of the Gospel (cf 2 Tim 1:8). It is in this strength that he proclaimed with confidence that no one and nothing can separate us from the love of God, whether tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword (cf Rom 8:35-39).

Jesus is glorious in all circumstances and victorious over sin and death. I dare say we will be victorious if we remain with Jesus.

Jesus was victorious over the devil's temptations (cf. Matthew 4:1-11). It's the good news that we heard last Sunday. We learned that the Spirit immediately led him to the desert after his baptism. He fasted for forty days and nights, after which the devil came to him. Imagine you have not eaten food or drunk water for that long period. Discernibly, Jesus must have already been hungry, thirsty, and tired. These are the conditions the devil usually plays his game of offering something attractive, pleasurable, and easy way out. But Jesus taught us to immediately dismiss the devil's offer and not engage in dialogue because the devil is the Father of Lies. We heard his firm response, "it is written." Self-knowledge, familiarity with the word of God, and knowing who God is are essential here. Unlike Adam and Eve, they dialogued with the devil and were deceived and thrown out of paradise. The wisdom is that when temptation comes, cut it off immediately. Don't dialogue with the devil, but surrender to God through prayer and embrace the spiritual discipline of penance. With Jesus, we will be victorious, and to him alone will we surrender our lives!

This Sunday, the transfiguration of Jesus once again reveals his victory! We are told that he was transfigured while in prayer, and the exploding heavenly light emanated from him. And the presence of Moses and Elijah, which testifies that he is the fulfillment of the promise of the Old Covenant, seized the attention of Peter, James, and John and made Peter desire to stay and build dwellings on the mountain (cf Matt 17:2-4). Of course, Jesus intentionally brought them on that mountain to prepare them for the scandal of the cross, for his impending suffering and death. His victory is very different from the ways of the world; it is according to the plan of God, which, more often than not, is difficult to comprehend because it is the Way of the Cross! Only through the grace of God will we see the good news beyond his horrible suffering and death.

The message of the transfiguration is that there is a connection between suffering and glory, loss and victory, death and resurrection. Hence, nothing worthwhile in life is ever straightforward; nothing valuable in life is plain and easy. If we are victorious with the Lord, we will also experience failures. If Jesus promises strength, it means we will experience weakness. If Jesus promises to give us rest, we will have anxiety. If Jesus gives us courage, we will have doubts. If Jesus tells us to come to follow him, it means there are crosses in our lives to carry. His transfiguration invites us to place our faith in God our Father, as the Responsorial Psalm puts it, "Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you" (Ps 33:22). But what is more profound and needful to ponder in the transfiguration of the Lord is the voice of the Father, similar to what was said in his baptism at the Jordan river: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matt 17:5; Matt 3:17). These words are worthy of our reflection than imagining Jesus' dazzling white appearance. It is similar to paying attention to the challenging words during the imposition of ashes on our foreheads during Ash Wednesday: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel," rather than merely following the tradition of receiving ashes.

Listening is essential in our walk with Jesus; it is the same with repenting and believing in the Gospel! Listening is one of the critical elements of prayer. If prayer means dialogue with God, we must listen; if we listen, we must find time and place. When we deliberately make a habit of listening to God in prayer, through his grace, we will increase our awareness and attend union with him. Then and only then, our strength is not from ourselves; it comes from God. Our strength in walking with Jesus comes from listening attentively; as long as we listen to him, we will persevere and be victorious, as Abraham did when called by God; though he was already seventy years old, he followed God's direction (cf Gen 12:4).

St. Gregory Palamas was an Eastern Orthodox saint and a prominent theologian during the late Byzantine period. He has something to tell us about Jesus' transfiguration. He called the exploding heavenly light at Mt. Tabor the uncreated light as the energy of God; he tells us that we can access this in prayer. He said St. Paul experienced this uncreated light on the road to Damascus, transfiguring him. St. Gregory is convinced that we, too, in some way, can share this in prayer. The Monks at Mt. Athos, in northeastern Greece, practiced what St. Gregory mentioned in his writing. During prayer, they say: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." This prayer is to be repeated again and again simultaneously with breathing, allowing it to occupy the mind and heart. Then in some way, you will find yourself amid this uncreated light. I think it is a way of surrendering and listening attentively.

Many great people in the Bible, like Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, climbed the mountain to listen to God, and there, God revealed his glory and strengthened them. Jesus brought his disciples to the mountain to pray; there, they experienced the glory of God and his strength. It is necessary to find our mountain; otherwise, it would be impossible to listen and gain strength from God. Our mountain could be a dedicated place of prayer, or it could be unplugging, for an hour or a day, all the personal electronic devices (phones, laptops, computers, iPad) to spend time in silence or prayerfully reading the Bible. We can fully listen if we climb our mountain. On this mountain, we set our mind to remember that our journey begins with victory because Jesus has defeated sin and death, which we celebrate on the mountain of all the mountains, the Holy Eucharist.

Let us remember there is no heavy burden in life that we cannot overcome and fully live if we find time in prayer to listen to Jesus, the source of our glory and victory!

A blessed Lenten journey!

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Pastor