

Homily – 2nd Sunday of Lent C

In our First Reading (Gn 15:5-12, 17-18), God makes two outstanding promises to Abram, namely, to bless him with innumerable descendants and give him the Land of Canaan. But can God be trusted? Certainly! We have always praised Abraham for his exemplary faith. But we also acknowledge that God helped him to believe. In a vision, “The Lord God took Abram outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so,’” he added, “shall your descendants be.” Jeff Cavins (in our Bible Study program), alluded to the popular assumption readily made here that it was NIGHT when God said to Abram “‘Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can.’” Can you imagine Abram counting them: 1, 2, 3... 50...100... 150... and then somehow lost track and became overwhelmed and gave up? But a closer look at the passage shows it was indeed DAYLIGHT.

How can we ascertain that the vision was in daylight and not a dream? Because as we read on, the later part of the passage says, “As the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abram... When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch....” Thus, evidently it was daylight originally. In daylight you can hardly see the stars. So, as Jeff Cavins rightly pointed out, Abraham did not see the stars to count. This is a beautiful exegesis (interpretation) and it is perfectly in line with the biblical definition of faith. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Thus, we read, “Abram put his faith in the LORD, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.” That is, though he did not see anything, he believed.

The second promise was that of the Land of Canaan. Abraham asked, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” Again, God in his love, helped him saying, “‘Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’” Abram brought him all these, split them in two, and placed each half opposite the other; but the birds he did not cut up. When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces. It was on that occasion that the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I give this land.” And Abram believed and trusted God.

The faith element today teaches us that our blessings are in the hands of God, though we may not see them now. How many children did Abraham see before he

died? How many descendants of the “covenant line” as many as the stars did he see in the Promised Land before he died? He saw only one “covenant line” descendant, Isaac. He did not even see the grandchildren or great grandchildren of Isaac. Isaac was unmarried at the time of his death. However, we are now in a privileged situation to see that God was faithful to his promise. All the remnant of Israel by blood and the Christians (the New Israel by faith) constitute the children of Abraham. Patience is therefore underlined, for the Scripture declares: “I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame” (Isa 49:23).

As the People of God, God has promised us the Spiritual Land of Heaven. Like Abram, we want to ask God, “How shall we know that we shall possess Heaven? That is the whole point of the Gospel passage (Lk 9:28-36) on the Transfiguration: Jesus revealed to Peter, James and John a glimpse of the heavenly glory. Again, the vision here was not a dream: “Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.” In this way, God helped us to believe that after our death, having lived holy lives and served the Lord, we shall rise again and inherit heaven. Hence, St Paul declares unmistakably, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body....” Beloved, our Lenten penance is not in vain. The glory that lies ahead is indescribable if we cooperate with God’s grace to the end.

Finally, what Lenten message can we draw from these insights? Lent is a time to inculcate discipline. Faith demands patience and patience takes a lot of discipline. However, our world is filled with the rush to make it here and now. People pray to God for help, and after a little time, they abandon the worship of God and stop going to Church. They do not trust in God any more. St Paul addressed this tendency in the Second Reading (Phil 3:17 - 4:1), saying, “For many, as I have often told you and now tell you even in tears, conduct themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction. Their God is their stomach; their glory is in their ‘shame.’ Their minds are occupied with earthly things.” This clearly anticipates the New Age phenomenon where the path of the cross is scorned; the discipline of lent like fasting and abstinence are mocked. And their gospel is, “Stop clinging to the old rugged cross!” Beloved, remember the words of Christ: “By your endurance you will gain your lives” (Luke 21:19).