

## Christmas Day (Year A) – December 25, 2016

IS 52:7-10; PS 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6; HEB 1:1-6; JN 1:1-18

We have a Hispanic parishioner who, along with her husband, is very active in our parish. A few Sundays ago, she was in the sacristy before a **Spanish Mass**. I didn't recognize her at first because she had gotten a haircut—a **serious** haircut. Since I've only ever known her with long hair, I think she may have noticed the puzzled look on my face as I tried to figure out who this *vaguely familiar-looking* person was.

She explained that she had donated her hair to **Locks of Love**. If you don't know what that is, here's a description of that organization:

**Locks of Love is a public non-profit organization that provides hairpieces to financially disadvantaged children in the United States and Canada under age 21 suffering from long-term medical hair loss from any diagnosis...using donated hair to create the highest quality hair prosthetics [to] help...restore their self-esteem and their confidence, enabling them to face the world and their peers.** <http://www.locksoflove.org/>

Knowing the **reason** she had cut off so much of her hair, I looked at her even *more* differently—this time not with **puzzlement**, but rather, with *admiration*. Her decision had **not** been based on **vanity**—on concern with *her own* appearance—but it had been rooted, instead, in **charity**—in her concern for the *kids whose appearance* had been marred by illness. She was willing to sacrifice much of what made her attractive for the good of those whose lives had been rocked by suffering.

Her action was *particularly* Christ-like—**above and beyond the actual donation she made**—because the Son of God **likewise** sacrificed *his own beauty—his own glory*—to rescue those he loved—*you and me and all other human beings*—from the most serious illness of all—the disease we call: **sin!**

This parishioner's choice to *diminish herself for the benefit of others* parallels the Son of God's actions. We see this hinted at in a familiar incident from the Gospel of Mark—the **Transfiguration of Jesus**:

*...after six days 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, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Eli'jah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And*

*Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli’jah.” For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid.* (Mk 9:2-6)

The disciples’ reaction makes it evident that *seeing the full glory of God* is beyond our human capacity to handle. And even though this experience utterly overwhelmed Peter, James and John—the Gospel does say, after all, that they were exceedingly afraid—it’s likely that Jesus *still* only revealed a limited amount of his glory.

Now let’s contrast this *partial, yet overwhelming, revelation of his glory* at the **Transfiguration** with the description of the **Messiah**—the **Suffering Servant**—given by the prophet Isaiah many centuries before Christ. Isaiah wrote:

*He had no majestic bearing to catch our eye, no beauty to draw us to him.* (Isa 53:2)

Clearly, what *would* attract people to the future Savior would be something *other than* physical beauty. As we know from the Gospels, what actually *did* attract so many people to Jesus was his **care for sinners**. And it is clear that he voluntarily humbled himself—*concealing his own glory and power*—so as not to intimidate or overwhelm those in most need of his mercy.

Jesus desires a personal relationship with each one of us, and he **personalizes** his *approach*, by **restraining** his *glory*, to correspond to what we can actually *handle*.

If the contrast between the **Messiah described by Isaiah** and the Gospel account of the **Transfiguration** is not enough proof that Jesus restrains his glory so as not to completely overwhelm us, then let’s take it a step further in order to better grasp this fact. Let’s consider a couple of verses from *the Christmas Eve Gospel*:

*...the angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”* (Mt 1:20-21)

The Son of God first appeared on earth as an **infant**. Could the all-powerful Son of God have made himself any *less* threatening than *that*—than coming to earth as a vulnerable *baby*?

Well, the answer is...yes!

Consider how Jesus approaches **us**...appears to **us**...in our own day. He **comes to us** as **food**—in the **Eucharist**—the bread which becomes his true **Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity** during the **Consecration** at Mass—as we’ll witness in a few minutes.

It’s rather mind boggling to consider that ***the closer Jesus comes to us, the more he humbles himself***, so as **not** to **overwhelm** us, but rather, to **draw** us to him—***little by little***—until **we** are able—***little by little***—to handle more and more of his **glory**.

Jesus takes an enormous risk in doing things this way—particularly in coming to us under the **appearance** of a simple piece of unleavened bread.

What **is** it, exactly, that makes this all so risky for **him**?

It’s the fact that many people **struggle** to believe—or even **refuse** to believe—that Jesus **could**—and **would**—present himself to us in the consecrated bread during Mass—because of humanity’s **fragile** and **fickle** faith.

That’s what **St. John** meant in today’s **Gospel** where he wrote:

***He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.*** (Jn 1:10-11)

The Son of God’s love for us is **so** great—**so** concerned is he that we be able to “handle” his glory in **digestible doses**—that he was willing to risk being **rejected** for the **way** he humbled himself, because he knew that some people would come up with **any reason**—make **any excuse**—**not** to believe in him.

But a faithful Christian is not just called to **believe in Jesus**. I can believe in the existence of something or someone without that **thing** or **person** having any real **impact** on my life. A Christian is called not just to believe **in** Jesus, but especially, to **believe Jesus**. To **believe Jesus** demands that we conform our lives to his will...and some people are just unwilling to do that.

Such people remain **perpetually dissatisfied** with life, **unspeakably lonely** and **ultimately unfulfilled**. Because of their rejection of Jesus, they must try to fill the **longing** in their heart—the longing that is in **every** human heart—by loading their lives up with **distractions**—**material possessions, entertainment, money, endless activity,**

the **excessive pursuit of pleasure**—*anything* to keep them from facing the emptiness of a heart untouched by God’s love.

Now...let’s return to **St. John’s Gospel** and finish his statement about the Son of God, because in these additional verses we find the reason for **hope**. We already know that some did not **know** him...others *rejected* him...but the Gospel tells us:

*...to those who **did** accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God.* (Jn 1:12-13)

Phrased in such **sophisticated theology**, we can easily miss what these verses actually mean for **you** and **me**. Put simply, St. John is talking about **Baptism**—the Sacrament that, among other things, implants his **Holy Spirit**—his *glory*—right **into our souls**.

The **Son of God**—the *Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity*—humbled himself to participate in this *mess* we call **human life**. He didn’t do this because **he** needed to learn what human life is like. As God, he already understands us better than we understand ourselves.

No...the Son of God became human for **two very specific** and *important* reasons.

*First*, so that **we** would realize that we have a very personal God who *understands every aspect of what we are going through in our lives*. He doesn’t just **tell** us—he *shows* us—by taking every aspect of what it means to be human—the good, the bad and the ugly.

But the **second** reason is the greatest reason of all. **He became one of us in order to make it possible for us to share in what he is**. At our Baptism, we first receive his glory. Through the Sacraments of Confession and Eucharist we receive the **means** to *increase* that glory he puts in us, *until we resemble him more and more*. The best example of what this is **supposed to** look like is the **Saints**.

There’s an incident in the life of **St. John Vianney** that illustrates this perfectly. The humble 19<sup>th</sup> Century parish priest from France labored to increase the glory of God that he received at his Baptism to such an extent that a visitor to his village, **simply seeing Fr. Vianney** as he walked from the rectory to the Church, remarked:

**“I have seen God in a man.”**

As astounding as that sounds—the glory of God, radiating unmistakably from a human being—this is not something reserved **for**...or restricted **to**...a few select individuals like Fr. Vianney.

It is what God wants **for**...and **from**...each of us.

**We know why Jesus came to us.** He came **to save us from our sins** and to **give us a share** in unimaginable glory and joy—in a level of happiness and the fulfillment of all our desires beyond anything we've even **dared** to imagine.

But why do **we** come to **him**?

**Why are we here...today?**

I suppose there are as many different **reasons** for being here as there are different **people** here today.

**Some people** here have **not yet discovered** the hard reality that nothing in **this life**—in **this world**—can provide lasting happiness.

**Others** have recognized this but are **not yet ready**—for whatever reasons—to give their lives over to Jesus.

**Still others** have realized that there is **only one way to fill the longing in our hearts** with the unlimited love and joy that our hearts were made to experience. And that way is not a **path**...it's a **Person**—the Way, the Truth and the Life...**Jesus Christ himself**.

If **that's** what we've come here for...if that's **who** we've come to meet here today...then we've come to the right place...for the right reasons!

**Merry Christmas!**