

Magnitude of the Moment

Having grown up in the 70's, I'm a big fan of classic rock music. As I read today's gospel, I recalled a song that perhaps you're familiar with. In the words of the refrain we hear: "Signs, signs, everywhere signs - blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind. Do this, do that - can't you read the signs?" That's what I wanted to ask Peter anyway. Can't you read the signs?

Having just witnessed the Transfiguration, Peter wants to erect 3 tents: one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus. I'm sure that he was excited about what he, James and John had just experienced and it's not all that surprising to think that he wanted to memorialize the event in some fashion. But, in proposing three tents, I'm concerned that Peter has failed to recognize the magnitude of the moment. His tent building plan fails to recognize the conversation that he was privy to in any way. Wouldn't it seem more likely, even more appropriate, for Peter to be filled with questions for Jesus? Peter has just heard a conversation describing Jesus' exodus from this earth and he has heard about Jesus' eventual death in Jerusalem - but he apparently misses this sign foreshadowing Jesus' passion. Furthermore, the three-tent proposal seemingly puts Jesus on equal footing with Moses and Elijah. While Moses and Elijah were truly great leaders in the history of the Hebrew people, Peter has failed to recognize the signs during Jesus' earthly ministry that distinguish Jesus as the promised Messiah. It shouldn't surprise us then that the Lord intervenes. It's as if God himself is impatiently saying: Peter, hello, wake up and see the signs! Jesus is my son.

How often do we, like Peter, fail to see the signs and consequently fail to recognize the magnitude of the moment before us? In a few minutes, we will be privileged to witness the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of our Savior. An event no less significant than the mountain top transfiguration of Jesus. And yet, despite hearing the words of consecration and the eucharistic prayer, how many of us will mindlessly take the Eucharist, Jesus' body and blood, into our hands without even acknowledging the magnitude of the moment with a simple AMEN? And having failed to recognize Jesus in the Eucharist, how many of us will then step outside these church doors and fail to recognize the presence of God in the people around us.

I am reminded of the story of the abbot of a once famous Buddhist monastery that had fallen into decline. The abbot was deeply troubled. His monks were lax in their practice, novices were leaving and lay supporters deserting to other centers. So, the abbot traveled far to a great sage and recounted his tale of woe, of how much he desired to transform his monastery and see it flourish and return to its days of greatness.

The sage looked the abbot in the eye and said, “The reason your monastery has languished is that the Buddha is living among you in disguise, and you have not honored Him.” The abbot hurried back, his mind in turmoil. The Buddha was at his monastery! Who could He be? Brother Hua?...No, he was too lazy. Brother Po?...No, he wasn't very bright. Brother Wei, surely, he was too young. But then he remembered that the Buddha was in disguise. So, he called his monks and revealed the sage's words. They, too, were taken aback and looked at each other with suspicion and with awe. Which one of them was the Buddha? Not knowing who among them was the Buddha, they took to treating everyone with respect. And in no time at all the monastery far surpassed its previous glory.

I've shared this story on a few different occasions so if you've heard it before I apologize for the redundancy. It's just that, for me anyway, every time I hear or tell the story, I am reminded to look for God among us. And I am reminded of the magnitude of the moment presented in every encounter that we have with our family members, coworkers, store clerks, fellow parishioners and even street people. And while it's pretty unlikely that we will be reminded of God's presence among us by a voice echoing from the clouds, if we pay attention, I believe that every day, we will have the opportunity to witness and to be unmistakable signs of God's love and presence among us. Signs that not even Peter could miss.