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Columnists

Before the glory comes the agony

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's readings: (R1) Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18; (R2) Romans 8:31-34; (R3) Mark 9:2-10.

Last Sunday, we saw that the baptized man will be tested, as Jesus was tested in the desert. This Sunday's readings show how the man of faith is tested. He may be asked to give up someone he deeply loves, as Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son (R1), God the Father was asked to sacrifice his Son (R2) and the Son was asked to sacrifice His life (R3).

The Transfiguration story underscores this theme of self-sacrifice and hints that it is the way to glory. Every second Sunday of Lent, this story is read, because the Transfiguration ties in closely with the Lenten themes of baptism and sacrifice. The voice from heaven connects it with Jesus baptism, and Moses and Elijah connect it with the sacrifice of the cross, for that was what they talked about with Jesus.

Peter, James and John needed to witness the Transfiguration of Jesus because they could not believe in the doctrine of the cross. St. Paul called the cross a stumbling block to the Jews. It certainly was that for the apostles. Right after Peter had made his glorious confession of faith that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told the apostles He was going to suffer, die and rise again. The apostles were astounded. Peter began to argue that this could never be. Jesus turned on Peter and fiercely rebuked him: "Get out of my way, you satan. If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross and follow in my steps."

You can imagine how the apostles felt. This was all mystery to them. So Jesus took the three to the mount. His Transfiguration proved that Peter's confession was correct. But the conversation with Moses and Elijah about the coming death of Jesus proved that what He had prophesied to them about the cross was also equally true. And still, they did not get the message.

Peter, ever the impetuous one, cried out to Jesus. "Let us stay here; let us erect three booths on this site." Ecstasy poses no problem for anyone. Who would come down from the

A Word for Sunday

pinnacle of joy if it were left to him to choose. But man cannot bear continued ecstasy any more than his eye can gaze steadily into the burning sun. The glimpse of glory is given only to help one carry the cross. After ecstasy comes agony, but after the agony comes ecstasy. That was why, to the three who would witness the agony, the glory of God was revealed and, in the midst of glory, the talk was of death. A short while before, Jesus had told the apostles that the path to glory is through the grave. Now the voice of God thundered, "Listen to Him!"

Abraham, the great model of faith, also had to take the road of the cross. God asked him to give up what he loved very much — Isaac, his only son. Abraham immediately built an altar on Mount Moriah, arranged wood on it and took a knife to kill his son. By this time, Abraham had already sacrificed himself to God. By his willingness to sacrifice his son, he proved his own will was subject to God's will. He discovered that this is the only offering God really wants. When the real victim — our willful selves — has been offered to God, the ram caught in the thicket is all that is needed to symbolize this offering.

So as we begin the second week of Lent, the Church reminds man — transfigured by baptism — that his faith will be tested:

- that all love must be subordinate to the love of God;
- that the only way to be strong is to have faith in God;
- that God will never fail those who have faith in Him;
- and that after the testing will come the glory!

Jesus welcomes a tax collector

By Cindy Bassett

It was going to be a profitable morning for tax collectors. The line of people waiting to declare their goods seemed to go on forever. Rome might well be the ruling capital of the world, but here in Capernaum all the travelers eventually passed through the booth of the tax collector. Capernaum was a crossroads for traders going north and south to Egypt.

That is how I, Matthew, came to be scorned by my own people, the Hebrews, and the Roman foreigners alike. I made my living from whatever excess tax was charged on these goods, and how much extra people paid was entirely up to me.

No decent Hebrew would have associated with the Romans. My people considered me among the murderers, robbers and other undesirables. I could see the hatred in their eyes as they passed through my customs booth.

The Romans, on the other hand, found me useful enough for their own purposes. I could read and write unlike most of the common people, but to them, I was a foreigner and not to be trusted.

My only so-called friends were other tax collectors — outcasts like myself. So despite the scores of people I met every day, I felt alone in the world with no connections to anyone.

But even I could dream of a better time. I had a secret longing like all Hebrews. For centuries, the prophets had foretold of a Messiah, and I hoped he would come in my lifetime to overthrow the Roman government. Then I would make a new start.

Lately, in the region of Galilee, a man named Jesus was attracting huge crowds wherever he went. I had seen him preaching once from a distance. Stories were circulating that Jesus had performed miracles, and people from as far away as Syria were coming to him with their sick. Could this Jesus heal a broken life?

Suddenly, there was Jesus standing before me. "Anything to declare?" I asked.

"Only myself," he replied. "Matthew, come and be my disciple."

I was dumfounded because there was no scorn in this man's eyes. "Tonight, I shall be a guest in your house,"

The Bible Corner

Jesus said, as he turned to leave.

Who would I invite to this dinner? No decent Hebrew would come and break bread with a tax collector. In the end, my only guests were other tax collectors. And Jesus did come with some fishermen he had also asked to be his disciples.

The Pharisees came, too, but not with the intention of entering my house. I heard them outside calling to Jesus' disciples, and I followed to listen.

"Why does your master eat in the home of such a man?" they demanded of Jesus' companions. "If he is truly a holy man, why would he associated with people like that?"

"Because people who are well have no need of a doctor!" Jesus said, rising from the table to address my accusers. "Now go and study the Scriptures. You will see that I have not come to call the self-righteous, but people like this, back to God!"

The Pharisees turned away angrily without another word, for Jesus had seen them for what they were.

"Master?" I asked, "You said that you came for sinners. Can you heal me?"

"Will you be my follower?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered immediately.

"Then come; that is all that you need to do," he said gently.

I left everything to follow Jesus. He had given me a fresh start. I brought only a pen and paper with me so that I could record all that Jesus did and said. In time, the whole world would come to know the truth.

Scripture reference: Matthew 9:9-13.

Lenten meditation: What things in my life need to be given to Jesus to heal?

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