

Last Epiphany A 2008

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN.

A brilliant magician was performing on an ocean liner. But every time he did a trick, the Captain's parrot would yell, "It's a trick. He's a phony. That's not magic." Then one evening during a storm, the ship sank while the magician was performing. The parrot and the magician ended up in the same lifeboat. For several days they just glared at each other, neither saying a word to the other. Finally the parrot said, "OK, I give up. What did you do with the ship?"

The parrot couldn't explain that last trick! It was too much to comprehend, even for a smart parrot. Have you ever been so convinced in your head that you forgot to listen to your heart? Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Scholars over the years have tried to explain what in the world Peter meant by this suggestion.

But, I think trying to find meaning to these words is pointless. It's simply the way Matthew explains that Peter was frightened and he just said the first thing that came into his head. He simply could not comprehend what was happening.

Sometimes there is “a disconnect” between what our head/brain tells us, and what our guts are indicating. You’re intimately familiar with the brain encased in your skull. But did you know you also have a second brain in your gut? Studies show that the human stomach has neurotransmitters similar to the brain. Our two brains communicate back and forth via a major nerve trunk extending down from the base of your brain all the way down into your abdomen. Because of this, your two brains directly influence each other.

But we are more likely to believe what our head tells us, rather than what our heart or our gut feelings are trying to convey. That’s a result of the enormous influence of the “enlightenment”. But times are changing and the newer generations—those called generation x (those born in the 70’s and 80’s) and those called the millennials, (born in the 90’s and in this century) who are more likely to determine their world-view based on feelings rather than intellectualism.

My observations—based on my experience with my 26 year old son, is that these generations practice group dating and place a greater value on relationships and a sense of community over and above the norms of society's expectations. They are more likely to go with their gut or heart rather than follow their head.

In that way they are more like the apostles than my generation (the “boomer” generation) is. I find that people of my generation spend a lot of time trying to find out “why” and want explanations about the mysteries that surround us. We're much more cynical about authority and don't take much for granted.

I find it ironic that like the apostles, the young folks are more comfortable integrating new information with images and story rather than explanations and graphs and charts. The apostles did not study about being Jesus' disciples; they were more into experiencing Jesus and his way of life than studying about it.

So we come to today's Gospel. In it's origins—Christianity was more about experience than about explanations. What's the difference between transfiguration and transformation? In my “boomer mind” I got curious about what distinguishes one from the other. The Gospel uses these words: “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

There was an actual physical change that came over Jesus—it was not an inner change—it was an outer, visible and physical change. I believe that the transfiguration is an event that was unique to Jesus and that cannot be accomplished by other humans.

But I also believe that Jesus wanted his top leaders (Peter, James, and John) to witness this event so that they could, in their own hearts, understand that Jesus had a unique role to play in their lives, and in the world.

He wanted to transform his disciples from being vaguely aware that Jesus was the Messiah to being absolutely transformed into witnesses that would change the world. And that is what happened.

Jesus took some regular people and by teaching them, leading them, and allowing them to witness miracles, to learn about forgiveness, and by his passion, to experience the greatest love they'd ever known—he transformed them into leaders.

Although transfiguration is not in our grasp—transformation surely is. There is another word pairing that this Gospel called to my mind.

How about the difference between resuscitation and resurrection? I had a church once that the bishop described as “being on life support”. This church was in the death throws for many years, but it is very difficult to “pull the plug” on a church.

A few years later I was looking for a church assignment and he asked if I would go. I said yes—silly me! So the bishop gave them three years to improve and begin to show signs of growth and change. In that case they were resuscitated—they were given another chance to have a life as a congregation. But they had not experienced resurrection—so the growth and change were very slow to come.

It wasn't until they died to their old ways of thinking that we were able to move forward. We all had to change our hearts, our minds, and our perceptions of what we needed to do. Once we were willing to discard old patterns of behavior, and willing to walk away from grudges and bitterness about the past, then we were free to live into the resurrection.

A parish that is in resurrection mode is vibrant, alive, active and growing—a parish that is in survival mode is hesitant about goals, nervous about resources, and grumpy.

Resuscitation is a stop-gap measure—the true goal is a resurrected life. That is true for a parish and for us as individuals. If you are “just getting by” it's not enough. There is a better life—God wants more for us than to just get by.

I'll tell you a story about a church that stopped just “getting by”. The sector called Villanueva near Tegucigalpa has a little Episcopal church called San Juan Evangelista (St. John Evangelist) that has been transforming people's lives for 10 years.

When I first started going there the people were living in shacks made of rotting lumber, corrugated tin pieces, and no windows. The children were barefoot, barely clothed, and under-nourished. The church gave them hope, gave them a place to come for medical care, a place to come together to see that they could make a difference by caring for each other.

As our missionaries witnessed for themselves, today—the members of this church are beyond just surviving—they are now learning what it takes to thrive—to succeed. They know that God wants more for them and that through their hard labor and belief in each other and faith in God’s providence, they’ll be stronger and better Christians.

Marcos is one of those people. (Tell his story) what can we learn from the people of San Juan Evangelista?

Transformation is the ultimate goal—transformation for us primarily as individuals, but also as a congregation. It is hard to imagine the awesome power of seeing someone change right before our eyes. I can only guess what Peter and the other apostles felt when they witnessed that spectacular event, but I know that transformation is within our grasp—even if transfiguration is beyond our capabilities.

We have so much more than the people of Villanueva—transformation is well within our reach. Do we have the will to do it? AMEN.