

BUILDING AN INNER SANCTUARY

Matthew 17:1-9: *1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. 3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah, talking with him. 4 And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah." 5 He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." 8 And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.*

9 And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead."

The famous - or infamous - crusades in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries A.D. were made up of Christians who came from Western Europe to eradicate the Muslim Arabs from Jerusalem and the rest of the holy lands. They came as soldiers and fought some bloody battles. Even though the crusades were noble efforts, as they traveled for months and months with big crosses on the front of their uniforms, overall, the crusades were a failure. They did gain Jerusalem for a while, only to lose it again.

Jerusalem is the heartland of three of the world's great religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. And the Temple Mount, where the Muslim Dome of the Rock has now sat for 1300 years, is a major focal point and holy site for all three. Simply speaking, the reason the crusades failed was that God never blessed the effort. And, though none of us can read His mind, there is a very good reason why God may have chosen not to bless the effort. He doesn't care!

I mean, truthfully speaking, what good are holy sites. They all become tourist attractions with curio shops, souvenir stands, and hotels, don't they? For Christians, the real temples are not in Jerusalem, they are right here. What that means is that you can go to Jerusalem, and I recommend you do if you get the chance, and you can walk where Jesus walked and see where they say He was crucified. But you won't be any closer to God while you are there than you are right here in this pew.

Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, St Paul taught us; and, as for me, wherever I go, I plan to take mine with me. As a baptized Christian, I carry with me, the living presence of God. So truthfully, I am as close to God now as I would be in Jerusalem, Rome or Timbuktu!

It says in today's Gospel about the Transfiguration, Peter offered to make three booths or tabernacles - one for Jesus, one for Elijah, and one for Moses. Here, in Matthew, nothing is said in response, but the Gospels of Mark and Luke say that Peter said that not knowing what he was talking about. Of course, that never did keep Peter from talking!

And, of course, if Peter had made these booths, and somehow the early church had managed to maintain these three shelters, they would be the world's top tourist attraction - surrounded with

hotels.

It is not clear why, in particular, he proposed that they build three booths. He was seeking either to provide shelter for the three great individuals or to begin the Feast of Booths because this great event must be the coming of the Lord. Certainly the point was to hold onto what was happening. But Jesus had no such thing in mind. As soon as the transfiguration was over, and Elijah and Moses disappeared, Jesus, and Peter, James, and John all descended the mountain and returned to the rest of the world. And Jesus told them to tell no one until He had risen from the dead.

We should build tabernacles, as well. But we build ours inside. They call this the interior life - the place where we can go and meet with God. Christianity, originally, was understood as effecting what you did and what you believed. The subjects of St Paul's letters were principally matters of the exterior life - what a person should believe, what God did and how Christians are supposed to behave. The interior life is there - in his letters - but was not the most prominent subject. This was needed because of where these early churches were in their faith. But we are called to the interior life.

One thing was right with Peter's idea: The tabernacle has to be built. I fell in love years ago with a very short book entitled, *My Heart, Christ's Home*. It is the allegorical story of a young man that invited Jesus into his life. His life, in the story, was his house. And the many rooms all represented different facets of his life. His library with its books represented the things he put into his mind, his play room was his social life, and so on.

Jesus went around the house and made a number of changes - just as God does when He comes into our lives. He begins a spiritual renovation. He removes sinful things, and puts in their place good things - virtues. In the library, for example, he took certain books out and threw them away. And He added others and put up a portrait of Himself - to think about. Together, they did something like this to every room.

But, when Jesus and the young man arrived at the drawing room, Jesus said He liked it very much. There were two nice overstuffed chairs and a fireplace. It was a still, peaceful room. It was perfect. And Jesus announced that He and His new friend would meet there every morning to talk about the things of the day. This, of course, represented the young man's prayer time - his interior life.

This is the kind of tabernacle or booth we need - every one of us - the place inside where we can meet with God - any time day or night. The interior life belongs deep inside. And, in a sense, we need to build it. Because, even though we are baptized, practicing Christians, it may not be there. St Jerome, 4th century priest and scholar, said, Seek only God, "Who is worshiped in the tabernacle of your heart." Yet many Christians do not have one.

So, how do we build it? We can draw four things from the story of the Transfiguration. Find silence, get to know yourself truthfully, be in awe of God, and pledge yourself to be obedient to Him.

SILENCE - On the mount of the Transfiguration, there was a moment of silence. Bp Anthony Bloom recommends we get alone - all alone - and get into our most peaceful place, and sit there for

fifteen minutes doing very little. Don't talk, don't read, don't pray. Don't watch TV. Maybe look out the window, or look at a cross. Be silent and become aware of the quiet world around you. Focus only on what you hear in the silence. And if you can, let that silence, that stillness, sort of come inside you.

A British reporter, during WWII, once asked Winston Churchill how much time each day he truly prayed. He said truly about two minutes. All the rest of his prayer time was spent trying to calm his spirit from all the activity constantly zooming around his mind.

KNOW YOURSELF - It says, a cloud formed and overshadowed the three disciples. For a short time, totally surrounded by a thick, blinding cloud, they were aware only of themselves. They couldn't even see each other like a thick fog. This represents our need to be aware of who we are. Be aware of all the gifts God has given you and be aware of your weaknesses. Be aware of the things God has forgiven you and be aware of the parts of you still unconverted to God. Be aware of who you are and what you can do; and be humbly aware of who you are not, and what you cannot do. This is knowing yourself. Many people will not truly know themselves because they have no silence and no interior life.

BE IN AWE - They saw Jesus in all His glory transfigured before them. Was this what Jesus looked like before He became a man? Is this what He will look like when He is back in heaven?

Be in awe of all the wonderful things that God has done for you up to now. Think about these things with deep satisfaction. Think of all the ways God provides for you. He has provided for you this church, your food, your family, your friends, your car and the gas that it takes to run. He has provided your job and your children and your parents. The disciples were in such awe of the voice of God, they fell on their faces. How awesome is our God.

OBEDIENCE - Lastly, swear your obedience to God. Tell Him He can have His way with you, and hold nothing back as best you can. The Bible says the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey Him. Jesus commanded the disciples tell no one what they had seen until He was risen from the dead. And they obeyed Him.

These things we can do to build booths inside us - to build an interior life with God. We get in silence, we are honest about who we are, we grow in awe of God and what he has done for us; and we swear obedience to Him as best we can.

The crusaders may have tried to liberate the holy sites in the holy land from the Arabs. But they didn't really need to. There is no site more holy site than the human soul - the one deep inside me where God and I can converse whenever and wherever we want. This is the one we want to build. It is the true tabernacle, the true "booth" - it is the interior life with God.