

Waking Up to the Big Picture

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Many people (including members of my own family, I confess) enjoy working on jigsaw puzzles. I've never seen the appeal myself, but usually if there's a family gathering that lasts for more than a day or so, someone will clear the dining table and dump out the pieces of a puzzle box on it. Next thing you know nearly everyone is absorbed in what might best be described as an exercise in self-induced frustration. I don't get it. I mean, if you want to know what the silly thing looks like when it's done, all you have to do is look at the picture on the box. And *that* image (though a bit smaller) has the advantage of not being distorted by the pattern of the jigsaw. But no, that would be too easy. Instead you start with a picture that has been deliberately cut into a thousand nearly identical interlocking parts and all scrambled up, so that you can spend hours unscrambling and reassembling them. I ask, is this a logical thing to do?

Don't get me wrong: I understand that working a puzzle is not so much about the task itself as it is a venue to bring people together. It's a way to have them work toward a common goal and allow them to interact. It's like playing cards or parlor games: the value is in the shared activity that builds and strengthens relationships—unlike other activities like watching television or playing computer games that stifle interaction and so tend to isolate people.

So, I'm not *opposed* to jigsaw puzzles (especially if I can get a sermon illustration out of them). And I've even been known to put down a piece or two myself so that I can say I did my part. Anyway, if you've ever worked on one, you know how most of the pieces are pretty indistinguishable. You often can't tell by looking at one what it's part of; it's just a couple blotches of color that only make sense when you fit it into its proper place in the big picture. Then suddenly you see what it is and how the picture would be incomplete without it. Of course, if you don't recognize what's on a piece, by comparing it to the picture on the box you might make a general guess about where it goes. But imagine how difficult it would be to assemble a puzzle if you didn't know what the final picture was. Then the subject of the puzzle would only emerge by degrees until suddenly you had enough of it there to make sense.

This is what we have going on in the early part of Jesus' ministry. He's going around from town to town with his disciples and revealing to them by degrees exactly who he is and what he's come to do by the things he says and does. With each episode Jesus gives his disciples another piece of the puzzle. And really we have two things going on: first, Jesus is showing his disciples who he is: the Christ, true God and true man; but just as important, he is building a relationship with them. It isn't enough for them just to see and understand the truth of who he is; he wants them know and trust him on a personal level, which is something that can only be accomplished by interacting and sharing time together.

And now this phase of his ministry is drawing to a close. He's given them just about all the pieces. It's time to see what they've managed to put together before moving on to the next phase, when Jesus will do what remains to be done to fulfill his messianic mission. So eight days before the action we heard about in this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus takes his disciples aside and asks them, "Okay, gentlemen, we've been working together on this picture for some time now. Tell me who you think I am." Now, understand that at this point even though they have most of the pieces, there are still a lot of them that they haven't managed to fit into the picture. There are others that they've put down in the wrong place. And on top of that,

they all have a false image in their minds about how the long-promised Christ should appear. Despite all that, an image is coming through. It's Peter who speaks up for the group, "We believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus confirms Peter's assertion. And now, about a week later, Jesus takes him and his other two closest disciples, James and John, up on a mountain to give them a more complete glimpse of the final portrait.

It's fitting that they go up on a mountain for this. Mountains seem to have a special place in the unfolding of God's revelation. It was on a mountain that the Lord first spoke to Moses from a burning bush, and then later in a dark and terrifying cloud when he gave his people the Law. It was on a mountain that Elijah called down fire from heaven to reveal the Lord's supremacy over a false god the people were worshipping. It was also on a mountain that Jesus gave the longest and most complete sermon that we have recorded for us in Scripture. It seems that God likes to reveal things about himself on mountains.

But beyond that, it's fitting because from the top of a mountain you can see more. You can see the big picture, how things on the ground all fit together. Like Moses in today's Old Testament reading, who from Pisgah's peak looked across the Jordan Valley to view the whole Promised Land. And what a vision that must have been. After forty years of wandering in a dry, desert, wasteland, all the while hearing glorious bits and pieces about the land flowing with milk and honey, but never getting to see anything but sand and dust, now to look from his vantage point and see green valleys and hills, streams and vineyards, forests and fruit orchards, and in the distance the blue water of the Mediterranean Sea ... a good, satisfying look at this long-awaited goal—but no, sorry Moses, you can't go in. All you get is a look, and then death.

Can you imagine his disappointment? To see everything he'd been hoping for, there, right in front of him, and then to be denied access because of one little sin. This exceptional man of God, a prophet greater than all the others, who led God's people out of bondage and gave them the Law, a man who knew God face to face, not allowed to go into the Promised Land because one time he lost his temper with the pathetic, grumbling Israelites and in his anger did something a little differently than he had been directed to do by God. What a price to pay! But there's a message here: no matter how great or godly a person may be, every sin no matter how small carries with it the terrible penalty of death. One sin will block your entrance to the glorious Promised Land. Funny, that's a part of the big picture we always want to forget.

Ah yes, but back to Jesus and his disciples on the mountain where he wants to give them a good look at the big picture concerning himself. We find Jesus praying. It's a special time of communion with his Father. We know too that Jesus is aware that his teaching and healing ministry is coming to a close, and that from here he's going to be making his way to Jerusalem where he will face unspeakable suffering and death to pay for your sins and mine. Doubtlessly, he's praying for strength to endure the coming trials; but I'm fairly certain that most of his prayers are for his disciples: that they may see the truth about him, and keep their trust in him throughout the dark days ahead.

And while Jesus prays, blinding light begins to radiate from his body. Light so bright that it shines through his woolen tunic as if it were transparent. For several minutes (at least) the One who is the Light and Life of the world lifts the veil on his true being, revealing a small part of the glory he set aside to become our brother in flesh. And what, we ask, are his disciples doing while this splendid revelation takes place? Are they praying by Jesus' side? Are they sharing this moment of sacred intimacy? No! They're sound asleep. And I suppose we can understand that. Tradition tells us that this takes place on Mount Hermon. It would have taken them about six hours to ascend to its 10,000 foot summit. If they'd started first thing in the morning, by now

it would now be early afternoon. They might have had a picnic lunch upon arrival at the top. And the combination of hours of exertion, a full stomach, and the gentle warmth of the sun on their shoulders surely would have hit their internal snooze buttons.

But more to the point, we're being told something about their spiritual condition. They are not awake. They have been studying under Jesus for some time now, and he's been unfolding the Scriptures to them about himself and his mission to redeem the world from sin. And for the most part, they've been sleeping through class. When Jesus talks about the coming Kingdom of God, they dream of an earthly kingdom and they think of worldly pleasures, wealth, and glory. Their focus is an illusion in the here and now, and how they're going to make out so well as the chief lieutenants of a man who is a prophet greater than Moses and a King greater than David. And when Jesus talks about true virtues like humility, serving others, forgiving those who hurt you, and suffering for the sake of righteousness ... well, these are pieces they can't fit into the puzzle, so they ignore them. Whenever he starts talking like that, they drift back into sweet, dreamy sleep.

But now their slumber is disturbed by the brilliant heavenly light shining forth from the one they said they believed was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" – a confession they made not really understanding what they were saying. Now it dawns on them that he is far more than they imagined. And here he is talking with two of the greatest men in history, men who not coincidentally both spoke to God upon a mountain, one of whom died fifteen hundred years ago, and the other who was carried alive into heaven by a whirlwind eight hundred years ago. They wake up to the fact that Jesus has been speaking of eternal, heavenly realities that go far beyond their dreams of worldly glory. And here, it seems to them, that heaven has come to earth. And immediately they begin to recalculate and expand their dreams and expectations. "This is going to be far more glorious than we thought!"

Ironically, Jesus and his two heavenly visitors are not talking about glory; they are talking about humiliation and suffering. They are engaged in conversation about Jesus' upcoming "departure". In the original language, the word is "exodus". It means to go out or away. But to any person familiar with Scripture, it calls to mind the exodus from Egypt, when God delivered his people from bondage. He did it by visiting judgment upon those who had enslaved his people. Ultimately, he did it by the death of the firstborn, and by protecting his own people with the blood of a lamb. And now Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about how he will fulfill that prophetic picture and deliver God's people from bondage to sin and its consequences by the death of God's Firstborn, and how his blood, the blood of the Lamb of God, will take away the sins of the world.

The conversation ended, Moses and Elijah begin to leave. But Peter and the others are not about to let this moment of glory fade. "Forget this suffering and dying stuff, let's make *this* place the seat of God's glory on earth right now. Let's expand from here and usher in the Kingdom. We'll set up a shrine! With you and Moses and Elijah here it will become the spiritual and political capital of a new world where God and man live together in perfect harmony." Such thoughts race through their minds and begin to dribble out of Peter's mouth. But St. Luke charitably dismisses his comment: "He didn't know what he was talking about."

And to show Peter and the others how mistaken his ideas were, a bright cloud containing God's holy presence appeared and began to envelop them. As they went into it, they were struck with terror as they stood face to face with this very small manifestation of God's absolute holiness. Instead of experiencing peace and joy, they were overwhelmed by a sense of shame. Each and every sin they had ever done, no matter how small, screamed disgrace in

their souls and caused them to tremble in anticipation of God's wrath and condemnation. Heaven on earth no longer seemed like such a good idea. Why? It was because they were not yet protected by the blood of the Lamb. It's the part of the puzzle we always want to forget: there can be no glory, no fulfillment of God's promises, no lasting joy in the Promised Land until the sin problem we all have is dealt with.

Performing my pastoral duties I have been asked many times why God doesn't end it all right now. Why doesn't he simply call a halt to the suffering, hardship, and pain of this life? Why doesn't he bring his own to his glory right now? Usually the person who asks the question is in a personal crisis of some kind: they've lost a loved one, they're in chronic pain, they're facing some terrible setback or disappointment. They look with eager expectation to the promises of God and the glory and joy he's told us we will share, and they ask, "If all that good is coming, why do I have to go through this? Why can't I have it now?" And when any one of us says such things, like Peter, we do not know what we're talking about. Because the reason is that God must first deal with the sin problem in you and in others. You say, "What do you mean, 'sin problem'?" I believe in Jesus. I believe he loves me and he died for my sin. I believe he washed me with his blood. What sin problem is there to deal with?"

Well, let's wake up to the big picture, shall we? How about the sin of unbelief? If you really believe that Jesus loves you, why can't you accept that what you're going through is part of his plan to perfect your faith and so bring you to his glory? Or how about the sin of being so wrapped up in your own problems that you can't see the great need of others all around you? They have problems you could help relieve by your faithful and loving service to them, and so show yourself to be like your Lord who served you in love. Or how about the sin of wanting things to end when you still could be witnessing your faith in the Lord Jesus with those who do not know him? You see, we all want to share with our Lord the glorious mountaintop experiences, but we don't want to share with him a heart full of love that sees people's needs and places them above our own. We don't want to be like our Lord who left behind his glory to deal with our sin problem. And that impatience and reluctance we have, along with the lack of trust and love, is all a part of the sin in our lives that the Lord must deal with. And we should be grateful that he does.

The voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Today the season of Epiphany, in which Christ reveals to us who he is, comes to its end. It ends on a high mountain where Jesus shows us a bit of the glory we will one day share. But now we turn to the season of Lent, in which we will descend with him back to the plain and valley and learn from him what it means to serve, suffer, and die for others. This is a part of the big picture he wants us to see, because in this too we shall see more of his glory: the glory of his great love for us. So may he give us the grace to listen to him, to follow him where he leads, and to trust him to bring us through every soul-cleansing trial to our heavenly goal. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!