

HOMILY LENT SUNDAY 02 – C\* (Homily 02)

“Citizens of Heaven”

(Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Psalm 91; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13)

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For those who succeed in obtaining Canadian citizenship, it is a joyous occasion. It takes place at Rideau Hall in the presence of the governor general, Michael Jean, and usually makes the CBC National News that night.

According to St. Paul, we have even more reason to rejoice, for we are citizens of heaven who must stand fast in Christ and live in hope and love.

St Paul knows the importance of being a Roman citizen. He relied on that reality to save his life once from the Roman civil authorities when he was accused of blasphemy by the Jewish religious leaders. St. Paul can therefore speak with conviction when proclaims in the second reading that we are citizens of heaven.

St. Paul goes on to explain the meaning of that citizenship. It means that we must stand firm in Jesus Christ by putting all our faith and trust in him. It also means living in hope for the experience of the fullness of God’s glory as we wait in hope for our own transformation.

The first reading and the Gospel flesh out St. Paul’s insight and exhortation. It begins with the gift of faith in the first reading. There we are given Abraham as a model of faith. He believed what God spoke to him, even though it seemed impossible, and that made him righteous in God’s eyes. The gift of deep faith is foundational.

That faith of Abraham led him into a mystical experience that can be compared to the transfiguration in the Gospel. Abraham was overcome with drowsiness, as were the disciples. There was a terrifying darkness, a theophany, a God encounter, like the cloud that overshadowed the disciples. There was also light, the light of a fire pot and firebrand that passed between the animals of sacrifice, like the brightness of the transfiguration, and finally a sacrifice of animals by which God made a covenant with Abraham that involved the gift of land for his people.

While there are many similarities between the first reading about Abraham and the transfiguration in the Gospel, there are also essential and critical differences. In the transfiguration account, it is Jesus himself who becomes the light, as he is transfigured and his clothes become dazzlingly bright and white. There is no sacrifice of animals – instead, Moses and Elijah appear and speak to Jesus of his exodus that he would accomplish in Jerusalem. It is Jesus himself who would be the sacrifice of a new covenant, as the Lamb of God who would give his life for the world.

Another difference is the voice of the Father booming from heaven, blessing Jesus and establishing a new covenant. We would participate in this new covenant by listening to Jesus, by doing his will, by being baptized into him and living his commandments. We would participate in this new covenant by standing firm in him, by essentially living within his new covenant, living within the reign of God, for we are truly citizens of heaven.

As such our hope must be strong that this faith will lead to the experience of the fullness of the glory of God when Jesus comes again as our saviour and finally establishes his reign over all of creation. However, that hope is not just a future hope but a present, if only partial, reality. St. Paul is clear – we are not waiting for citizenship; we are citizens of heaven. As such, we must believe in Jesus Christ, stand firm in him and live in him and in his new covenant of love. We must also continue to hope for the fullness of that new creation that he began with the gift of his life on the cross, his resurrection from the dead that we will celebrate at Easter, and the gift of his Spirit that we will celebrate at Pentecost.

A story that appeared in a Catholic magazine in 2007 is a good example of this call to faith, hope and love. Valen Cover is a beautiful and vibrant 24-year-old woman who works for a Canadian-owned insurance company in York, Pennsylvania, USA. You would not know it to look at her or hear her chirpy voice, but her battle with serious illness began as a child of five when she suffered a seizure disorder. In grade 8 she underwent scoliosis back surgery and now has rods inserted on both sides of her spine. At age 10 she was diagnosed with Polycystic Kidney Disease (PKD), the most common genetic, life-threatening disease that affects 125 million people worldwide. Many in her family have the disease. Before the age of 20, Valen endured a litany of medical anomalies, including pancreatitis, a bilateral nephrectomy, over 70 blood transfusions, delirium, temporary memory loss, bleeding

kidney cysts, the loss of her two diseased kidneys, and a successful kidney transplant.

Today she remains unbloodied and unbowed by the curve ball that life has thrown at her, saying she does not dwell on the past but would rather focus on the brightest aspects of every part of her life. “As bad as things get, there is always hope,” she states. “I consider myself blessed because I have survived all of these challenging obstacles to give others hope that they, too, can overcome all odds in life.”

She knows that her life could easily be presented as a distressing tale of lost youth, lengthy hospital stays, major operations, vanishing hope and disappearing dreams, but she will not allow those thoughts to clutter her mind. Instead, she chose to take the high road, realizing that she had been given a second chance at life and determining that she would turn the negatives of her life into positives by doing all she can to help find a cure to the incurable disease.

Her positive attitude and faith are two reasons she is alive today. Instead of being bitter about the past, she decided to use her experiences to give strength to others with PKD. Besides holding down a full time job, she travels extensively to speak at international conventions and other gatherings to spread the message about her battle with the disease and the need to find a cure.

Valen says that it is the faith, hope and loving support of her family and medical teams that brought her back from the abyss of death during some of the darkest hours of her life. Her humble courage in the face of death is an example of someone who lives out the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: “Faith has to do with things that are not seen, and hope with things that are not at hand.”

Valen Cover is certainly someone who knows that she is a citizen of heaven, someone who is standing firm in faith in Christ and making the most of her time here on earth as she waits in hope for the future transformation of her body when Jesus comes again.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is privileged food for us as citizens of heaven, standing firm in faith in Christ. We believe that as we receive his Body and Blood, we are transformed already into his Body and

commissioned to go out like Valen Cover, to be instruments of love and signs of hope to others.

So remember, we are citizens of heaven, called to stand firm in Christ and to live in hope and love.