

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Fr. Samuel Springuel

28 August, 2022

1st Reading Ecclesiasticus 3:17–18,20,28–29

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 68:4–5,6–7,10–11

2nd Reading Hebrews 12:18–19,22–24A

Gospel Luke 14:1,7–14

I would like you to consider the two theophanies described in today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews. The first is the theophany on Sinai when God appeared in cloud and lightening, thunder and shaking ground. It was like a mighty thunderstorm and a volcanic explosion were occurring simultaneously and you were standing right next to it. It was an experience that was overwhelming to the senses; there was no sleeping through it. God was making himself heard, and the Israelites realized they were nothing in the face of the power on display. Indeed, it was such a powerful experience, that the Israelites ask that it never happen again. They were shaken, frightened, terrified even, of the power of God revealed in that way. While no one died in that encounter, they felt sure that in the face of repeated exposure to such power, somebody, if not everybody, would die. Profoundly uncomfortable, they wanted nothing more than to never have to face that again.

And then there is the second theophany. This one is more allegorical, describing not a real event, but a real experience nonetheless. It is the experience of one who has heard the proclamation of the Gospel and followed its dictum: "Repent and believe." That proclamation was considerably quieter than the storm and fury of Sinai. A preacher, a teacher, a mentor draws the listener closer not through awe and fear, not by blasting our senses and overwhelming us, but by offering us a glimpse of the festal gathering in heaven. They show us the joy, the communion, that could be ours, if we would just accept and follow Christ. There is power here, God sits as judge over all, but it is not a power that is employed loudly, to great theatrical effect. Rather, it is a power that is employed subtly; a power placed at your service. It will transform you as you approach, making you perfect, so that you may fully partake of the banquet, but slowly, step by step.

Now, thinking about those two theophanies, which would you rather be on the receiving end of? While there might be some thrill seekers out there that would dare to experience the first, I'm fairly certain most of us would much rather experience the second. Its gentleness, its invitation, would be far less threatening. The theophany at Sinai is the kind of experience that demands attention. It grabs you by the shoulders and shakes you to your core. It commands that you listen and obey, because the one revealed has power over you, far more power than you could ever dare to dream to resist.

By contrast, the second theophany is almost absurdly gentle. What it shows you is attractive, but by no means compelling. You could ignore it if you so desired; say “Thanks, but no thanks,” and be on your merry way. After all, it promises change, radical change, and most of us, if we’re being honest with ourselves, may want some small changes around the edges of our lives, but not anything really significant. Is the reward it shows us, the festal gathering in the heavenly Jerusalem, really worth the price of admission? We are left with that choice; our freedom is respected.

This illustrates nicely the humility of God. God is willing to let us say “no” to him. He created us. He chose the Israelites and showed His power to them. He sent His Son to be our redeemer. And even after so much effort, we can still say “no.” For all His power, God is willing to respect our choices and will not force us to accept Him. There will be consequences for our choices, but they are ours to make. The ball is in our court.

What will you choose? Will you accept the invitation offered to you? Will you admit that you aren’t perfect and cooperate in the changes necessary to make you fit to sit at the heavenly banquet? Or will you strike out on your own? Will you decide that you are satisfied with what you have or can make of yourself? What will you choose?