

AFFIRMATION



Matthew 17:5 "While (Peter) was still speaking (there on the mount of Transfiguration), suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'"

My paternal grandfather came to visit our house only once in my life. I was very young at the time, and the memories of that visit are few and vague. Nevertheless, I do recall that my grandfather was very elderly, that he walked only with the aid of a cane, and that his hair was as white as snow, as mine is now becoming. My most vivid memory of that visit, though, was sneaking out into the kitchen at night after I had been put down to bed and playing cards with my grandfather at the kitchen

table. Only later as I shared that story with my family did I come to realize that my grandfather had had a bad back and so he preferred the straight chairs in the kitchen over sitting with the other adults in the more comfortable seats of the living room. That furtive playing of cards with my grandfather remains one of my fondest memories of growing up, a childhood pleasure often recalled. What card game we actually played I do not remember. In fact, the only other detail I can recall about my grandfather's visit was that on some occasion he took me aside and spoke to me privately, and said how proud he was of me, his only son's only son. That declaration of my grandfather was like a voice from heaven for me as a young child, a defining moment of who I was and where I came from. I was the only son of my grandfather's only son.

Later when I was older and more stories were told about my grandfather, I learned that he had been a hard, if not a cruel, man; that he had been an alcoholic, and that he moved out on my father's mother, and yet lived just around the corner, but left her alone with the task of raising the children. I then began to understand more clearly why my father had had to decline a full scholarship to Brown University, in order to stay home and work and support his mother and younger sister. And I remember no great sadness in our house at the news of my grandfather's death. I remember only that my father left town for a few days,

and that when he returned, he informed his children the next morning at breakfast, at that same kitchen table, that our names had been etched on his casket.

When I turned 21 years of age, my father gave me a ruby and diamond ring which his father had worn most of his adult life. Though I was somewhat reluctant about the idea of wearing a ring at all at that age, I wore it anyway, because it was my father's father's ring, and I was the only son of my grandfather's only son. That ring was a badge of identity for me, a mysterious symbol of who I was and where I came from, a reminder that helped name me and affirm me. I wore that ring for more than 30 years, until I finally presented that same ring to my eldest son on his 21st birthday, who now proudly wears it as a family heirloom, his father's father's father's ring.

The early Christians struggled to identify and name Jesus, and later made use of any and every passage from the Hebrew Scriptures that could help define and establish and affirm who Jesus was. Interestingly, the voice from heaven in today's Gospel repeats the exact same words recorded at Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. "Here is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased." How easy, for instance, it was to image a heavenly voice on these occasions repeating those poetic words from Isaiah's first prophecy about the suffering servant. Christians today cannot read those words from Isaiah without thinking of

Jesus, though this voice from heaven was imagined long before Jesus had suffered. And it is interesting to remember that Jesus himself, we are told in Luke's Gospel, later read aloud that very passage at the synagogue in Nazareth: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth. . . a light to lighten the Gentiles, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. . ."

Interestingly, in Mark's version of that story, there is no mention of Jesus reading this Scripture passage, only teaching. Nonetheless there are many such verses from the Hebrew Scriptures that are so familiar to Christians that we almost cannot hear or understand without reference to Jesus. For such words and images have been the Church's principal way of naming and affirming Jesus, and our hopes for him.

It is a very basic human need to be named and affirmed. We are all of us, I think, longing for some kind of reassuring voice of affirmation, of identification, of connection for our own lives. Such is the main reason, I imagine, that we humans

create and maintain the many and varied celebrations and ceremonies in our lives; to name and affirm who we are, where we have come from, and what is expected of us, to locate and create symbols and images to establish our sense of place and our identity and purpose in belonging.

We all want and need to be named and known, each and every one of us. It is a part of being human. Without it we can quickly become disoriented, discouraged in the face of life's hardships, uncertain and even disillusioned about ourselves. Without it, we can become lost. Words and symbols of affirmation are a saving grace, a constructive and reinforcing power of creation necessary to build up and sustain us and our lives, as individuals and as a community. They are a connection to that unseen web of life that holds all things together.

In point of fact, neither the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism or on the mount of Transfiguration, nor my grandfather's declaration to me as a child, actually changed anything. They each simply declared the obvious, stated the facts. They each just articulated or manifested some already existing reality. They were, nonetheless, epiphanies from God. For in so naming, everything was changed, everything was perceived anew, and understood differently. Within them the former things come to pass, and new things are declared. Such is the immense and unseen power of affirmation. It is the Word of God. It is the

work of God, and of God's people. So let us rejoice and be glad
in it. AMEN.