

Wednesday meeting – 8th March 2017

Divine encounter and the suffering for the gospel

Today we are reflecting on the second Sunday of lent. In fact,

I am talking about two themes: Divine Encounter - the right hand theme, **and Suffering for the Gospel** - the left hand theme. They are interlinked.

We are going to meet our old friend Abraham:

Genesis 12:1

The Lord has said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

First of all we look at the divine encounter. A divine encounter is when God actually comes to meet people. I bought a book from a bookshop when I was abroad and I saw it day before yesterday. I leafed through it and the book talks about 10 people's experiences in the Middle East - 10 people who don't have access to Christianity and how, through dreams, they have received a divine encounter with Jesus Christ. That means that even when we aren't working, God is working and He is giving something called a divine encounter. God is coming to meet people, He is talking with them and having a relationship with them.

When I was a child and I went through school and college, I never heard of anyone meeting God. I always thought we Christians had to follow the teachings of Christ in the church, grit your teeth, build up your guts, put your best foot forward and march for Christ. All the strength, power and commitment came from myself. I never met anyone who told me that there is a possibility of a divine encounter.

But here, directly in the readings of next Sunday, we are told: God can meet and talk with people.

What did He say? *"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."* A little later in the reading it mentions that **Abraham was 75 years old**. So the divine encounter said to leave what he had and to go.

This is the opposite of what happens to older people. I remember my grandmother who lived until the grand old age of 96. She had her senses until she was 96, but she had this tendency, as she grew older, since we lived in Badulla - she didn't want to leave Badulla to go anywhere for anything. The tendency was to remain in the house. As she grew a little older, she had this tendency to spend more time in her room and sleep in her bed. That's the natural tendency.

We are getting old as well. Those days we used to go out on mission and when you go out on mission you don't know where you're going to sleep. So most often in some corridor in someone's house, someone gives you a sheet, you put it down and I can't remember one night we didn't sleep. You just put your head down and out you go. This is because we were younger and more adaptable to the situations. But now as I grow older, I find that if I leave my home, leave my bed and go to some other country - I am guaranteed a sleepless night because we are unable to cope with the changes.

But look at what God did to Abraham. He said, "You better leave this comfort, the security and the familiar and go." How on earth will he be able to do such a thing? That's what the divine encounter

does. The divine encounter enables us to respond to God. This is the good news I've learnt over the years.

If you can't respond to God, what you need is not more guts or will power - what you need is a deeper, longer encounter with the Lord.

- Here is the source of infinite strength,
- Here is the source of supernatural power - not human power.

Suddenly you're boxing way beyond your weight. You've been transformed into somebody totally beyond your capacity. **Isn't that good news?** You don't have to live within your limitations, you don't have to live within your brokenness - because of the divine encounter.

Let's see how it happened:

Genesis 12:2

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.

God says three things:

1. I will make you a nation
2. I will make your name great
3. I will make you a blessing

When you have a divine encounter, first of all, you receive a blessing in your own

life. From my experience I can tell you - those who have a divine encounter find peace with God, find internal rest, happiness and joy. That's what people are looking for all over and you find it. We have started the flow of the Morning Prayer and it is beautiful. We spend this hour, we sing, reflect on the word and after that we go to the church. When I go to the church, I'm so inspired because there are so many vehicles. The churchyard is full of vehicles. When you go into the church you see that men and women are seated at the feet of the Holy Eucharist. When you sit one complete hour, you come out rested, refreshed and everything cleared and your life at peace with God.

We must have a psychiatric clinic at the gate with a board saying, "Come, and troubled ones; come, disturbed ones; come, those who have no answer." ☺ Two hours of therapy and it's free. You don't have side effects, but you'll have positive effects. You'll be healed and transformed because things happen within you.

So people say they can't come because they have too many problems - best of luck to you. We are putting the problem into our hearts.

You can see here that the divine encounter not only gives you a blessing, but it says that you will become a blessing. You will be someone that God will use to bless the

world. God doesn't send you here to this world in isolation. He didn't send you to look after you, mollycoddle you, carry you, love you, wipe away your tears, make you rich, powerful, the king of all you survey and then die.

God has a purpose through your life and mine. If you live for yourself you're going to have a short circuit. You take the wire and fix it to your foot, and soon you're going to be killed because you didn't have an outlet to the goodness that God has given you.

Therefore, God is telling Abraham, "I'll bless you, I'll make you really happy, I'll meet your needs and I'll make you rich." But then He doesn't say, "I'll build you a house where you can live forever." He says, "Then I will make you a blessing for other people." That's when you offer yourself in service. Many of us who work here will tell you how happy we become when we serve the Lord. Saturday night we had a night vigil in Ampitiya. We were up from 7pm to 5:30am - one unbroken time of prayer. Normally you should be fagged out and crawling. But we were fresh and alive because you gave of yourself to others.

So first God gave Abraham the strength to go. Don't worry, when you have to do something that involves a divine encounter, He will give you the strength. If you don't have the strength then sit at His feet. Then He blessed him - an internal blessing of happiness, peace and joy and external blessing by looking after His needs. Then He told Abraham, "I didn't come only for you - I came to make you a blessing for other people."

One way you can be a blessing in this month is to take it as your mission to bring other people to the four step retreat. If someone didn't take the trouble to keep following me and pestering me and forcing me to come for those talks, I never would've been touched by the Lord. There must be someone waiting whom God has prepared - but God wants someone to host His presence and take Him to those people. What do we say? "He of course, she of course, he will never, she will never." Leave that to God!

What do you do?

- You pray,
- Be in His presence and
- Become the source by which God reaches out to these people.

If each of us reaches out to 10 people, we may be changing the history of many lives. They need it more than you do. The worst you'll get is a rejection and Jesus said, "When you're rejected in my name - rejoice, because your name is written in heaven." We will have a shortcut because when we die, we will go to Him.

So there are three things in a divine encounter.

- First of all you receive strength,
- Second you are blessed internally and externally.
- Third: God makes you a blessing.

How does He do that?

Genesis 12:3

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

As you get older, why do you want to stay with the familiar environment? Because that is your security.

You feel safe in your house, with your relations, with the things you have, with the normal practices you have. God is offering Abraham a creative solution. *He is saying, "I will bring that security and that house and that safety wherever you go."*

How does He do that? *By a simple method.* He says, *"When I come to live with you, I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you."* In other words He is saying, "I'll take the battle now. Your fight is mine, I'm going with you. So wherever you go is home."

Why is it home? Because in that place, with me, is my familiar God. When I have my familiar God who is loving me, who is powerful and giving me security - changing environments, changing people no longer causes any stress.

- We are thinking the only solution we have is to be secure in our house.
- We are thinking the only solution we have is to be secure with our bank account.
- We are thinking the only answer we have is to hold on to our loved ones - because that's the only answer we know.

But the Lord is saying, "When I come into your life through a divine encounter, I will become your home; so wherever you go, you are safe. I will become your security; so wherever you go you'll be at rest. I will become your strength; so wherever you go, all the resources you need will be there."

These are the real riches.

- We are no longer limited by a place,
- we are no longer limited by the bank account we have or don't have,
- we are no longer limited by the resources in the world we live in

Because we have Him who provides everything we need. He walks with us. Circumstances change, situations change. When those change, you lean on Him once again and He carries you through it. This is the divine encounter.

With the divine encounter is a call to the carrying of the gospel. When you carry it to people - people can reject you; He will console you. People can judge you; He will comfort you. You're no longer afraid of the things of the world. That's why Jesus said in John 16 - "In the world you will have trouble; but take courage, my children, for I have overcome the world."

What does that mean? If you have the Lord living inside you, you have a relationship with Him and you're growing in that relationship - whatever the circumstances of the world, you will be an overcomer. That's why we need a life of prayer, that's why we need to sit at His feet. Divine encounters are found in that place.

Let's look at the gospel. In the Old Testament we saw Abraham's divine encounter and in the New Testament we have Jesus' divine encounter.

Matthew 17:1

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

These are the three that were at Gethsemane as well. Though they were like the inner circle of Jesus, you can't say they were developed people. We know that Peter denied him, and the other two, when Jesus was passing a Samaritan village, the Samaritans told him to get up. James and John were also called the sons of thunder because they got angry all the time. The sons of thunder said, "Lord, shall we call down fire from heaven to destroy these people?" It was not a very good Christian response - they wanted to destroy the lot.

The apostles of Jesus were very much like us. They also would have said, "Lord, I'm not wanting you to hurt them, but teach them a good lesson. Lord, I don't want to say - but damn good that it happened."

Matthew 17:2

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

It is showing the divine encounter. Divine encounters have an impact on our lives. How do you know? In the 30th chapter of the book of Exodus - we find Moses spending 40 days with God. God had a long chat with Moses. After the chat, Moses came down from the mountain. He didn't feel any difference, he thought the chat was over and he came down. When people saw Moses, they ran away from him because the Bible says his face was shining. Why? He was having this relationship with God, and it was rubbing off on his face. So he took a curtain and put it over his face so that it couldn't be seen. The glory of God rubbed off on Moses.

As you spend time with God, it rubs off on you. If you spend time in a bar boozing it'll rub off on you as well. If you spend time in adultery and wrong living, it'll rub off on you as well. You can look at the face and see this. In the same way, if you have a divine encounter on a continuous basis, it will rub off on you.

For Jesus, as I am seeing it now, it happened the other way around. What happened to Moses was it came from outside and went inside. But I think what happened here is, it started inside because He is God Himself and came outside - into His clothes, His face and He glowed with the divine presence of God. Can you imagine the power He would have generated in His life?

All of us are also called to a divine encounter. When you have a divine encounter it gives you a transformation inside which glows outside. It'll happen over time because we are weak human beings. Over months, over years, it begins to glow in our lives.

What happened later?

Matthew 17:3

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

On either side was Moses and Elijah. I always use this as an argument for the teaching in the church that those who die will go to the Lord and they're not waiting until the second coming. Unfortunately, there are many ways to interpret the scripture - but the Protestant tradition has interpreted it in such a way to say that people who die will be of no use because they are all under the earth, waiting for the second coming. That interpretation was more than searching the scriptural truth, it was to fight with the Catholics who were praying for souls in purgatory and praying to the saints.

Unfortunately, by doing that we lost this great opportunity to realize that even after you die you remain

with God. It's absurd to think that you grow in your spiritual journey, you become matured in the inner life of God and suddenly you're buried and become nothing. It's an absurd thing to think of.

Here is the proof, because two characters from the Old Testament seem to be alive - Moses and Elijah. They aren't holograms - holograms weren't created yet. They were Moses and Elijah. Where do you think they came from? They came from the heart of God. So, many scripture scholars say that these two figures have a meaning.

First, Moses: Moses is the person who brought the law of God. He brought the Ten Commandments, he got angry and dashed it on the ground and he couldn't go to the promised land. Instead he watched it from afar. Biblical scholars will tell you that Jesus interpreted the law perfectly. He gave the true meaning of the law. So Moses came to meet him.

On the other side was Elijah. Elijah was the prophet of miracles. He did more miracles than any other prophet. Jesus did more miracles than Elijah. We don't know what they said but we have an educated guess.

Moses said, "You have interpreted the law, you have explained the heart of the law to the people - but the hearts of people remain unchanged." Elijah said, "You have done all the miracles I did, but the hearts of the people remain unchanged." Both of them said, "We have a message from the Father for you - miracles and the explanation of the law, while it is good, is not enough. You need to take another step. You need to offer your life on the cross as a sacrifice." This is the sacrifice for the gospel.

How do you know they would have had such a discussion? There are many reasons, but one is here in the reading itself:

Matthew 17:9

As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

In other words, they were talking about the death. Let me tell you - Jesus understood something in His transfiguration: God, by filling Him with a divine encounter said, "Not only will I give you the strength and power, not only will I console you, but it is I who will go with you to that death and beyond." When you take on a job or a mission for God and if God is working through you and in you - however difficult the mission is, you will find joy, peace and happiness with it. **That's what has been testified by the saints.**

Those who have been killed walked in joy to that place, those who were persecuted wrongly dealt with it in internal peace - because they were taken to that place by the God who was working within them. The opposite is equally true. Those who have no higher purpose - they can have the most comfortable room with an air bed and an air condition - but air and mare will be fighting all the time.

You'll be miserable, sad, angry, lonely and depressed simply because you don't have a higher purpose - nothing higher than;

- going for some holiday
- in some place or the other;
- eating that food,
- sitting around,
- coming home and looking at each other's face,

- watching tv,
- Get angry with each other, live miserably until you die.

If you have a higher purpose,

- you can be rejected,
- persecuted,
- attacked,
- go through difficulties

But the presence of your God within your life brings peace, joy, love and goodness flowing over and through you into the world.

That's why we are called to suffer for the gospel. Those days we thought suffering for the gospel meant that I, Lalith, am called to suffer. So I say, "Thank you very much, but find someone else because I don't want to suffer for anybody."

My instinct is not to suffer and we are programmed like that. This is different. It's a divine encounter, an intimacy with God, the fullness of His grace that gives you that strength.

We will look at one verse from the second reading:

2 Timothy 1:8

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner...

St. Paul started serving the Lord. He was persecuting people and then he had a divine encounter, God filled him with His presence and now he was in jail. He says, "Don't be afraid of what's happening to me."

2 Timothy 1:8 continued

...but join with me in suffering for the gospel...

If he stopped there it would be a big problem, but fortunately he didn't stop there.

How do you suffer for the gospel?

2 Timothy 1:8 continued

...by the power of God.

Who is facing the suffering? God is facing it.

Who is dealing with the challenges? God is dealing with it.

Who is taking you through it? He is taking you through it, and you're enjoying His presence and power right through the challenge.

What are you doing otherwise? We are at home.

What do you want to do?

- You don't want to suffer so you've closed all the doors and are staying inside.
- You're looking at the television and then at each other's faces.

- Then we are sick of each other,
- sick of the television.

The problem is that you don't have a higher purpose.

The good news is, you deal with that challenge by the power of God - not by your own power. That's when you see the power of God at work.

Look at Joseph Vaz - the Saint of Sri Lanka. He had a divine encounter as a young man. Bishop Vianney, who is like an authority on Joseph Vaz, says he was to be thrown out because of politics in the church. He was about to be thrown out when someone saw him and went and told the bishop, "That man who is here in this place - while he is saying the mass, his feet are rising above the ground." That means he was having a divine encounter. He was filled with the love, joy and peace of God - but God wasn't consoling him for himself.

God said, "Go to the most difficult, challenging place that you face there." That was Ceylon at that moment, where no catholic priest was allowed. What pushes him to do that? The divine encounter. It gives him strength, grace and anointing - but it also calls him to the mission.

When he comes here, he doesn't have a red carpet waiting for him, he doesn't have kandyan dancers, he doesn't have the president come and meet him and he doesn't have all the recognition. What is waiting for him? Dysentery. He is almost dying - but he is sustained by the strength of God. He is thrown into jail, rejected by people, helping sick people and then chased out of the kingdom - all the time, having the grace of His divine presence - not just to face it but to overcome it.

In the end, the church became established because of this one man. If he said, "Enough is enough, how much of suffering should one man go through for the kingdom. God isn't very helpful. I'm going back to India," nobody would have blamed him. *But he didn't* - **because he had a divine encounter.**

So many of us here tonight - if all of us have a journey and a divine encounter, can you imagine what God can do in the lives of people around us? The good news is - don't worry.

- He will look after you,
- He will strengthen you,
- He will console you,
- He will take you to the end

He has fixed all that. He is telling you, "Take my mission in your hands."