There’s something in the gospel today that I’ve overlooked or underappreciated in prior readings: It has to do with pronouns and nouns, particularly singular and plural.

Boy, does that sound like the prelude to a dry and arcane sermon. But bear with me.

After looking at the gospel in this linguistic light, I then looked back at the reading from Exodus. That reinforced my observation. So I’ll start with Exodus.

In this prefiguring of our Lord’s transfiguration, Moses goes up the mountain alone. His encounter with God in the guise of the burning bush is solitary. He comes down from Mount Sinai, glowing face veiled (as Paul points out in today’s reading), and then he tells the gathered crowd of his revelatory experience. It’s beautiful, wonderful!

By the way, when Paul writes of the veil it reminds me of an experience I sometimes have in my dreams. It’s as if there’s a veil separating me from the dream experience. I don’t mean this metaphorically, but literally. The scene appears to be dimmed as if by an intervening curtain or veil. This has been so pronounced that on at least a couple of occasions I’ve tried in the dream to open my eyes wider, only to find myself awake in my bed. It think Paul is saying something similar, that Christ has lifted that veil for us, allowing us to experience God’s presence more directly, for us to be fully awake to the divine.

Well, back to Moses and Jesus.

Whereas Moses climbs the mountain by himself, Jesus “took with him Peter and James and John.” We learn this in the opening words of today’s gospel. That’s in contrast to Moses’ solitary experience.

In this account of Jesus’ transfiguration references to persons, plural, are about equal to that those of Jesus in the singular. I find that to be stunning. More about that in a moment.

Another difference is that Jesus’ radiant figure—all of him, as opposed to Moses’ face only—is witnessed fully by those present. No dimming of the light by veil or any other means.

The person, plural, includes not only Peter, James, and John, but also Moses and Elijah.

This is a further elaboration of the Incarnation itself. Jesus, God incarnate, is a human among humans. Even in this even which emphasizes his divinity other human beings are included—both his contemporaries (the three who ascended the mountain with him) and his forebears, heroes of the faith who had gone before him. Of course Moses and Elijah represent other episodes of divine revelation in other ways, but they also represent humanity as a whole and Jesus Christ’s connection with the whole of humanity, past, present, and future.

As we all know this is the last Sunday after the Epiphany, making it the last Sunday before Lent.

Next Sunday we will read of another dramatic event in Jesus’ life, long before the events in today’s gospel—his being driven into the wilderness alone, to be tempted by Satan alone. That event takes place in isolation. Another real contrast to today’s gospel.

Of course we know that sometimes withdrew to places of solitude to pray by himself. So solitude can be a place of and time of testing, isolated from the influence and support of other people, but it can also be a necessary condition for reflection and prayer to replenish stores of spiritual resouces.

But in between those, where most of life is lived (both Jesus’ and ours) is in the company of other people. This is part, I believe, of the importance of the Incarnation, God’s apparent desire to know us from the inside out, experiencing the world as one of us.

An important aside here: I’ve carefully said “humans, human beings, and persons” in my descriptions, even though we’re aware that all the figures in the scenes described here are male. However, we must remember that the Incarnation could not have taken place without the faithful and willing cooperation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and that the Church simply could not have grown and flourished through these twenty-one centuries without the early and constant ministry of women who fill the pages of scripture and who, finally, are receiving full recognition and leadership roles in the Church’s unfolding history. So Peter, James, John, Moses, and Elijah, and most especially Jesus represent these women, largely unnamed, as well as the men whose names are known to us.

So: on this day that is the hinge between the season of Epiphany, brightly burning revelations of God in the world, and Lent, we have this scene in which we are represented not only by Jesus himself, but also by the friends he has brought along with him and the towering figures from the past whom God has supplied in a vision.

On this day, then, we celebrate our great and loving God who speaks to us through each other, especially in those transformative and revelatory moments signified by the event in today’s gospel.

May we all grow as receivers and sharers of God’s glory, making us windows through whom the grace of God shines.

Amen. + + +