

## 27 February 2022, The Last Sunday after the Epiphany: Luke 9:28-36

In 865 A.D. (1,157 years ago), an archbishop and missionary named Anskar, died. Anskar was born in France in 801 and educated in a prestigious monastic school. Being exceptionally bright, he was chosen to establish a new monastery school in Germany; for one so young (in his early 20s), this was an exceptional honor. However, Anskar believed his calling was to be a missionary. When the newly converted Danish king sought missionaries to convert his people, Anskar volunteered. His fellow-monks thought him crazy; Anskar's biographer states that they could not believe anyone would want to be with such "unknown and barbarous folk."

In Denmark Anskar established a school and mission. Despite his ardent labors there were few converts but lots of indifference and hostility. In 829 he accepted a call to Sweden: different location, same results. At age 30 he was chosen Archbishop of Hamburg, Germany, and continued his missionary work from there. The conversion of the Scandinavian people remained his lifelong dream. He not only evangelized; he courageously addressed other issues, such as the brutal slave trade. Anskar was tireless; he never gave up on bringing the Gospel to that "unknown and barbarous folk." Yet, on his death the struggling mission collapsed, his few converts reverted to paganism. The Danes and Swedes did become Christian, but that harvest of conversion was 100 years away. Anskar's life will never be made into a movie; he was a failure. Yet Anskar is called the "Apostle of the North," one of the patron saints of Sweden. How can this flop and his failure be the stuff of sainthood?

For now, let us shift to a different failure. The scene is not a wintry landscape but a mountain in Judea. This story also ends with disappointment: *And they (Peter, James, and John) kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.* The story of the Transfiguration is incredible; this silence is more incredible: How could they not have shared their experience?

Anskar was a faithful failure; Peter, James, and John were faithfully silent, and I think for the same reason: they had all caught a glimpse of an awesome reality that utterly engulfed them, or Luke's word, "overshadowed" them. One of the signs of being truly 'overshadowed' by God is that our individual stories become much less important, and God's story becomes of first importance. The contemporary writer Richard Rohr puts it this way: "Please don't get caught in your small stories...they're not the whole you, the great you, not the Great River...not where your big life can really happen...Strangely, your real life is not about 'you.' It is a part of a much larger stream called God."

Rohr goes on to write that faith is simply the ability "to trust the Big River of God's providential love," which is to trust the God we can see, that is Jesus, trust the God who flows, the Holy Spirit, and trust the source itself, the Father. This Big River of God's providential love already flows above you and beneath you, around you and through you. You need only desire to be in it.

Anskar surely knew that what God called him to do would bear fruit even if he, in this life, would not see it. The disciples, came down the mountain, surely knowing that what they had seen was not about the story they had to tell, but about God's story, the Father's glory in Jesus. They were now called not to tell a story about what *they* had experienced, about what happened to *them*, but to live God's story, to be swept up in God's story coming true in Jesus. How deep and wondrous is God's awesome Being, and how feeble our attempts to put words to it. Words objectify and constrict. God is always subject, infinite even as He indwells us.

Nothing we offer to Christ or for Christ is in vain, never useless, always effectual. Even our failures, our awed silences, will be used by God for God's purposes. You may not see the result of your labor, but you may be absolutely assured that in Christ all things will come to perfection, because in Christ all the fullness of God dwells (Colossians 1:19). You need not be anxious over how your life, your story, turns out; you are within God's story, and there will be no end to joy and wonder. In the meantime, we are to serve and not count the cost, to give ourselves in Christ for others and not worry about result, to share God's story not ours. And so, blessed Peter, James, and John, pray for us. Blessed Anskar, patron saint of the 'unknown and barbarous folk,' pray for us.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.