

## Epiphany 4C.

Readings: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians: 12: 12-31a, Luke 4: 14-21

### Theophany!

#### Introduction

The story of the rescue of the 16 survivors of the crashed flight, FAU 571 in Mendoza Province of north-west Argentina, on October 13, 1972 is thrilling. Discovered, only because two of the survivors, Nando Parrado and Roberto Canessa, finally breached the Andes mountains and literally walked to Chile for help, the experience spoke not just of human resilience, but Christian faith and courage. Indeed, as we saw at the beginning of our clip, Carlitos (Carlos Paéz Rodríguez), reflects, as he looks back 20 years, upon the spiritual nature of the event, speaking about the mystery of God. But Carlitos, was not the only one of the survivors who turned to faith categories to interpret what happened. Another, Roberto Canessa, in an interview of 1998, spoke movingly when he said, "The arrival of the rescue helicopters was like a theophany of God".

It is with this word "theophany" that I want to begin this morning in our thinking together. So, let's begin by asking the question what does this theological word mean?

A theophany is the word used in Christian discourse to refer to the presence of God, better said, the "outbreak of God in human reality", but an outbreak with particular results: liberation, freedom. So, when Canessa spoke of the arrival of the rescue helicopters as a theophany, he was close to biblical thinking. He and his friends were rescued, freed, liberated from the situation that had been generated by the combination of unpredictable weather and human/pilot folly. Similarly, in the Bible, theophanies refer to God's rescuing human beings from the mess we have created for ourselves, from situations of social dysfunction, injustice and violence.

Let's look at some examples. To begin with, in the early part of the Hebrew Bible, there is the theophany or appearance of God (Yahweh) in the burning bush. What happens here? Moses, a very ordinary young man who can barely speak without a stutter, is called to challenge the pharaoh, demanding the release, the rescue of his people from oppression. But there are other theophanies as well. Soon after Moses' experience, we hear of the theophany or appearance of the pillar of cloud, which leads the Hebrew slaves to actually escape their suffering (Exodus), through the sea to freedom. And there is yet another theophany: that of God (Yahweh) on Mt Sinai, delivering to Moses the Ten Commandments, which serves as a sort of glue, to keep the twelve conflictive tribal groups (the amphictyony) together, as they walk to freedom. And finally, in the New Testament, Jesus himself is *the* theophany, the authoritative appearance of God, taking the side of human beings in their struggle for life and meaning. Indeed, one of the early Church Fathers, Eusebius of Caesarea, wrote a little book precisely on this idea, called "*Peri theophaneias*" - "Divine Manifestation", about the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, as *the* ultimate theophany of God.

So, what we can conclude is this: that theophanies in the Bible always disturb, upset unsatisfactory situations, upturning them, rescuing people, generating new better realities. So, with that in mind, let's turn to the Gospel reading for today.

#### The Gospel

In our reading, Luke is telling us that Jesus' appearance in his local synagogue bears the weight of a theophany. Jesus stands and reads from the Hebrew Bible, from the prophet Isaiah.

Let's register a number of points:

***First, that in keeping with what we have said already: this theophany of God through Jesus, is disturbing and liberating.*** Jesus' words, challenge, upset the usual social and political power relations of ancient authoritarian Eastern societies; and if read 'with eyes that see', also of our modern free-market societies. This theological and social platform taken from the Hebrew vision called "***Jubilee***" is liberating, but not everyone likes it. In fact, the impending conflict is almost anticipated, with Jesus' provocative final words, "*This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.*" Jesus is 'in their face' and a clue to the resistance facing him and his 'reform package' focused upon liberation, is the stony silence of the synagogue community. We are told that their eyes were fixed upon him (*atenisontes*). The sense is that this "gaze" is not good, that it carries a threat.

*And so, to the second point. Why the brooding hostility?* Well no surprise here. Jubilee, the heart of Jesus' proclamation, comes from Hebrew social sensitivity, ensuring that extremes of social and economic inequality do not fester or grow. The Hebrew vision, world-view, included four basic prescriptions or policies. They were these" leaving the soil fallow so that nature might rest, might recuperate; freeing people from their financial debts; liberating people who had fallen into slavery; and finally, the return to each individual of his family's property, which he may have lost. Let's face it! All these proposals, would clearly disturb the status quo.

*And to the final point, a point that cuts deep! The first proposal of Jubilee: respect for the land and the environment, reverberates in the echo chamber of our changing climate, and its most recent iteration: the burning of Australia.* As Christians, let me say that it is absolutely fundamental that we not only offer practical responses to those who are suffering from the fires, but equally, that we think, that we get our theological and ethical heads around the reality. What we are learning as Australians, even if very belatedly, is that we do not stand *above* the material world, but rather we are very much *part* of it, *interdependent* with it, and *dependent* upon it. And that is exactly what Hebrew scripture tells us, what Jesus imparts through his social vision, what the Christian tradition teaches us through the Church Fathers, and what modern science is saying. They are all at one!

The recent words of Pope Francis in his recent encyclical *Laudato Si - On Care for our Common Home* (2015), puts it this way: that we are *kin*, brothers and sisters to the earth, to the environment, to the animals: and explains that they all have a kind of voice that makes claims upon us. In this sense, put most starkly, urgently, the bush-fires and the death of so much and so many, are earth's appeal to us, earth's prayer to us.

Francis says,

*"this sister, this sister earth, now cries out to us...pleading that we take another course."*