

## Second Sunday in Lent, Year B

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

Psalms 115

Romans 8:31-34

Mark 9:2-10

You and I are made for union with God. The longing for this union is built into our souls, and hard-wired into our very DNA. Everything we strive for in this life is driven at least in part by this longing. It's what led many of you to seek marriage; and it's what led Deacon Errol and I to pursue the priesthood.

The complete fulfilment of our longing for union with God is only possible in the life to come, and yet, if we are open to recognising and receiving it, we are offered a taste of it in this life. As our Lord said, the Kingdom of God is among us.

The sacraments—most especially the Mass—are the greatest instances of this – moments where the categories of time and space give way, and heaven and earth touch in very real and powerful ways. And yet, *anything* that is truly good and of God in our lives can serve as a kind of sacrament, pointing beyond itself to the one who infuses it with life and meaning.

For instance, any time we offer an act of selfless love for another, it is a glimpse of the perfect love with God for which we long. For the parents here, amidst all the messiness and challenges of family life, there have no doubt been countless instances of this selfless love for your children. The moment their first child is born, most parents say that the world takes on a whole new meaning, and much of what they focused on previously now holds little-to-no interest at all. This heart-rending love for a newborn—which some parents find almost too much to take—is but a small glimpse of the love God has for us, and which he invites us to enter into with him.

Great art can also be a powerful window in this life to the glory of God, which is why we Catholics have such a long history of adorning our churches with beautiful art, and supporting our liturgy with beautiful music. My favourite piece of music is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Whenever I take the time to give it my full attention it's invariably a quasi-transcendent experience – and so I always make time to listen to it as a gift to myself every Christmas and Easter.

Even the assorted wrong turns in our life are so often simply the misplaced searching for the divine union we all long for, seeking to satisfy our longing in created things rather than in the one who created them. Sadly, so often we seem to settle for these wrong turns, almost as though we think we're not worthy of anything more. Here's how C.S. Lewis once put it:

“It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.  
We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition

when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” (The Weight of Glory)

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Let me give an example of how easily we settle for mere scraps. I read a fascinating article recently by the musician and cultural critic Ted Gioia, in which he tried to give an honest assessment of the state of our cultural life in 2024. In it, he proposed that the creative economy in our culture could be viewed as a kind of food chain. At the start of the food chain is pure artistic endeavour, which he pictures as a comparatively small fish (at least in recent decades), one which is always in danger of being eaten by the entertainment industry, the next and larger fish along the line.

Rather than pointing beyond itself to something deeper, which art does at its best, the entertainment industry is more concerned with giving the audience what they want, and making a profit in the process. The best entertainment can have elements of good art, of course, but the transcendent value of good art is often lost in the process, just as the nutritional value of a good hearty meal is not as present in mass-produced fast food.

Until recently, the entertainment industry has been the dominant player in the culture economy, but Gioia argues that another, larger fish has emerged along the food chain, which threatens both art and entertainment: namely, a culture of distraction. Consider all the scrolling and swiping on our devices these days: not so much the consumption of art or entertainment as simply ceaseless activity.

Each stimulus lasts only a few seconds and is then followed with the offer of another. And unlike the often-seasonal nature of fashion or aesthetics, this phenomenon is based less on trends and more on our basic bodily chemistry. Our brain rewards these brief bursts of distraction with a hit of dopamine, encouraging us to repeat the cycle. Of course, such a loop of pleasure and reinforcement is inherently habit forming, and in extreme forms is known by another name: addiction.

And this, Gioia argues, is the logical next step in the cultural food chain if things continue as they currently are: art being subsumed by entertainment, which is subsumed by a culture of distraction, which is subsumed by a culture of addiction. All social media platforms are following the example of TikTok and moving more and more to fast-paced scrolling and reeling interfaces, so as to optimise the dopamine loop. And anything that might persuade you to leave the platform—such as a news story or some other outside link—is punished by the algorithms, since this might liberate you from being hooked to the platform. You can see why Gioia calls these platforms the “dopamine cartel”.

This shift from a slow, traditional culture, to a fast modern culture, to a dopamine culture can be seen across the board. For example, in sport, the movement is from most young people playing sport, to most people watching sport, to, increasingly, many people gambling on sport. In journalism, we go from reading newspapers, to accessing multimedia, to a culture of clickbait. Still images go from being viewed on an art gallery wall, to being viewed on a phone, to being scrolled on a phone. Moving images go from film or television, to YouTube videos, to 15-second snippets. Music goes from a symphony or an album, to single tracks, to TikToks. Communication goes from handwritten letters, to e-mails, to emoji-laden texts. Crucially, relationships go from courtship and marriage, to a sense of sexual freedom and licence, to simply swiping on an app.

I should emphasise that I'm as guilty of some of these things as anyone else (well, not the relationship apps!), but this rise of a dopamine culture is part of why I've resisted getting a smartphone to this day, to the incomprehension of most of the students in our parish schools!

Like any addiction, the dopamine cycle over time delivers less and less pleasure, and eventually leads to dependence and even depression. And though these impacts are well-known within the tech industry, most people don't hear much about it, because too many people are making far too much money from the "dopamine cartel" – the kind of money that puts even drug cartels to shame. But the widespread nature of this dopamine culture is aggravating many pre-existing social problems – in education, in workplaces, in politics, and in our relationships.

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Okay, why am I saying all this? Well, as I said at the outset, much of this fast-paced scrambling for entertainment and distraction is—at its core—simply a misplaced searching for the kind of deep fulfilment and meaning that we've all been made for, a longing that's embedded within our very soul.

To allow God to touch our lives, we need to make room for him to enter. And so, especially in this season of Lent, it would be worthwhile for us all to unplug from time to time, and to allow some chosen silence and stillness in our lives. Perhaps on your commute to work or school, instead of filling it with more noise, to allow some precious silence, to take in your natural surroundings (which are so much better seen in person than on a screen), or to have a conversation with those around you.

Of course, part of the fast-paced scrambling of our culture is no doubt driven by a *fear* of stillness and silence, a fear of loneliness, a fear of reality. T.S. Eliot said that mankind cannot bear very much reality, while Blaise Pascal famously said that all human evil comes from our inability to sit still in a room by ourselves – a statement I would quibble with, but which nonetheless points to a deep truth.

I suspect that part of our fear is that if we did stop to see ourselves as we are, we would not like what we saw, and that if others saw us as we truly are, they would find us unlovable. We fear that there is no offer of a holiday by the sea (to return to C.S. Lewis' image); that there is no underlying love or order in our existence, but that all is simply chaos and cruelty. These fears are not new, neither is our culture's attempts at drowning them out with noise. We just have better technology now and can distract ourselves more aggressively.

In the face of such fears and the subsequent distractions, our faith and our Gospel passage offer us the way out. What is this offer? An encounter. An encounter with the one who chose us before we were born, who created us in love, and who came among us to win our redemption. In short, an encounter with the living God.

The Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor was an experience of the divine breaking into this world. For a precious few moments, Jesus let his true reality—his true glory—shine forth, a revelation which would dovetail with the risen glory he would embody following his Resurrection.

Peter, James and John, who would have so much asked of them during our Lord's Passion, and then in the early days of the Church, were allowed this mountain-top experience in part to support them during their trials to come. And they shared the glorious memory of this event with the Church--with us—in part to support us throughout our walk of faith.

The wonder of our faith is the revelation of Jesus as the perfect manifestation of the Father's face. And in Jesus we are shown—once and for all—that God need not be feared.

The divine is breaking into our world once more in this very Mass, as we have the privilege of taking part in an encounter with God that literally transforms the world. Very shortly we will once again participate in the very action that Jesus asked us to “do in memory of him”. And as we remember, the limits of time and space collapse – and the one sacrifice that took place on Calvary two millennia ago is re-presented on this very altar. In this Eucharistic encounter, we experience a taste of the Lord's glory, and a taste of perfect union with God. May we let this encounter bear fruit in our lives, to heal us of our fears, and to nourish us to be agents of Christ's Good News for the world.

*The Ted Gioia article I have cited: <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/the-state-of-the-culture-2024>*