

Misunderstanding and being misunderstood are part of the human experience. There are times in all our lives when we just don't get it, but recognizing them as such means that we must have gotten it later. Therefore there's always hope of improving our understanding.

We probably don't enjoy being reminded of times when we failed to understand something important. Being misunderstood can be amusing. Most preachers have gotten comments on their sermons that left them wondering, "What sermon were *you* listening to?" But being misunderstood can be deeply frustrating. I think Jesus is venting a bit of frustration when he references Deuteronomy, saying, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?"

That seems like a strange thing to say at that moment. One commentary points out, "Neither the boy's father nor the disciples have shown lack of faith, and neither have turned against him, so it seems that Jesus speaks of general human infidelity and, in particular, that of his contemporaries. Reading ahead, we know that Jesus' deeds of mercy will be greeted with disbelief, and that this will eventually lead to the cross."\* Say what you want about Jesus, you can't say he doesn't understand the big picture.

His disciples, famously, did not understand. Not completely, anyway. Just before this healing incident, they had experienced the dramatic event we call the Transfiguration, where seemingly out of nowhere, Jesus appears in heavenly glory, and he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, who were not only long-gone Jewish heroes, but also symbolized the Law and the Prophets.

We have to be careful not to misunderstand what happens next. God says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" And Moses and Elijah vanish. On the one hand, Jesus is unambiguously being set apart from Moses and Elijah, and God's words are clear. On the other, remember that Peter, John, and James, and of course Jesus himself, were all Jewish, so it's not as if Moses and Elijah, or the Law and the Prophets, were unimportant. And God didn't say *not* to listen to them anymore. Jesus would go on quoting from Scripture and teaching his interpretation of Jewish law after this moment. If Jesus was supposed to nullify his Jewish tradition, heritage, and identity, nobody told him!

While yes, Jesus is fully divine, and no one will ever get a better view of God than when we look to Jesus, at least this side of heaven, there's another important distinction between him and Moses and Elijah. After this moment in which all three of them are revealed in heavenly glory, Moses and Elijah get to go back to heaven. Jesus gets to go to Golgotha. The way Luke tells the story makes it abundantly clear that as glorious as heavenly splendor is, the greater glory is that of the cross, although the glory of the cross is veiled. God had intervened in human history by giving the Law and the Prophets, and they still have much to teach us, but in Jesus, God finally intervenes with God's own sacrifice, although veiled under layers of rejection, brutality, shame, and failure.

Our translation says that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were speaking of Jesus's "departure," and that's a shame, because the Greek word Luke used was *exodus*. Jesus's passion is a transformational, covenantal liberation of humanity by God, just as the Exodus of the Old Testament was, or at least, that seems to be St. Luke's understanding.

Peter, John, and James understood only in part. But we should be charitable: no one could have understood the agony and disgrace of the crucifixion as glorious until they met Jesus after his resurrection and allowed him to open their minds. God had to intervene again to lift that veil and reveal the glory of God's redemption of humanity and the whole universe. And we should likewise be charitable to ourselves, wondering what spiritual truths are veiled from our minds, and asking God to lift our veils.

St. Paul pointed out that just because people have a covenantal relationship with God, doesn't mean they immediately understand everything there is to understand about God. It would be a great understatement to say that that such a rush of understanding would be overwhelming. So we shouldn't necessarily lament that some things are beyond our understanding; we might accept that some limits are there for our protection, as an act of love.

That, I think, is why God reveals spiritual truths to humanity in the context of a deepening relationship with God. We talk about being God's children, and that is what we are, but no loving, or even sensible, parent, would throw all of the complex, painful, and disappointing truths of life at a child at once, and then leave the child to deal with them alone. No, we bring our children to understanding in the context of a loving relationship so they are supported as they grapple with truths as they become relevant to their lives.

If human beings, who are limited in our capacity to know and to love, nevertheless choose to meld knowledge and love into a process that is stronger than either of them alone, how much more does God, whose knowledge and love are perfectly boundless, enlighten humanity in love? Our misunderstanding must grieve God, but God's love is far stronger than any grief or aggravation.

That's another reason why Jesus came down from the mountaintop. God's love is proactive. For Jesus to stay away from humanity, passively waiting for people to seek him out once in a while, would have been a betrayal of his very nature, which is love. No, Jesus had to come back to us, to get on with healing, enlightening, and saving us.

Jesus knew this return would come at a cost, which he was not afraid to pay. His disciples were beginning to understand that the way ahead would become harder for Jesus, and for themselves. We should commend them for their faith, because even though they did not, at the time, understand *why* their immediate future was darkening, did not understand the ultimate good that Jesus would accomplish, they chose to remain his faithful followers.

We should strive to be so faithful. I think that looks like first deciding that we want

to follow Jesus, no matter where he leads us, and then immediately praying that he will sustain and strengthen us, and continue enlightening us in love. From there, we discern how, specifically, Jesus is calling us to follow him. Considering our options is a simple way to discern, and the upcoming season of Lent offers us a rich set of options.

I sent an email letter to the parish that describes some of the spiritual practices that can strengthen our relationship with God, and if you didn't get a copy of that letter, please let me know and I'll give you one. Briefly, though, I urge you to commit to come to church on Ash Wednesday, the Sundays of Lent, and the Great Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter. Just deciding to put church attendance ahead of all other priorities is a powerful, and rewarding, spiritual discipline. And I urge you to sign up for Spiritual Gifts, starting March 10. That program will be the foundation of our adult formation and spiritual growth programming.

Beyond that, you might consider taking advantage of our Sunday morning class, Thursday morning Bible Study, and our new offering of Morning Prayer in the Chapel on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. You might consider reading something on your own, or participating in an online Lenten program.

You might also consider volunteering at Grace Mission, getting a bit of the hands-on ministry experience that Jesus prioritized. You probably won't encounter anyone who is literally possessed by a demon — though if you do, let a member of the clergy know... we have ways of dealing with that. You probably will encounter people who have suffered in many other ways. You will see Jesus in them, for he knew suffering, too; and in your compassion, you will reveal Jesus to them.

By God's grace, may we come to understand that we have no higher calling, and no greater joy, than following Jesus so closely that we are united with him. When we do, we and all who look on will be astounded at the greatness of God.

\*<http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/cepfll.shtml>