

Fifth Beatles and Thirteenth Disciples

Luke 9:28-36

On Sunday, February 9, 1964, my family gathered around the TV to watch the Ed Sullivan Show. We weren't big TV watchers by today's standards, but Ed Sullivan and Bonanza were always scheduled for our Sunday evening entertainment. That particular night I had no idea that the Beatles were going to make their American debut. I didn't know who the Beatles were. All that was about to change.

What I remember was the nervous excitement on Ed Sullivan's face as he introduced these equally nervous boys from Liverpool to a hysterical mass of screaming teenagers. Their matching mop top haircuts and Neru jackets, combined with the energy of their muse, made them seem to me as if aliens has just landed and taken over the world. For me, at least, they had. From that moment on I was carried out to sea on a rip tide called Beatlemania.

Writers, critics and fans will forever speculate about the unprecedented impact the Beatles had on the Baby Boom generation. Many over the years have said that there was clearly a "fifth Beatle" behind the scenes who shaped them into something extraordinary. Their first manager, Brian Epstein, knew how to package and promote them to a predominantly preppy and conservative American audience. He is said by some to be the fifth Beatle. Others say it was their brilliant producer, George Martin, who collaborated with them in the studio and honed their raw talent into a form of pop music that was eventually embraced and celebrated by the snootiest of critics.

These theories about the fifth Beatle have great merit, but they still fall short. I know for a fact who the fifth Beatle was. I saw him come to life inside the Inglewood theater when their first movie, *A Hard Day's Night*, premiered. As soon as the credits rolled across the screen, I ran to the front of the theater, jumped up on the stage and bowed with them as though I was the fifth member of this phenomenal rock and roll band. In a way, I was. And so were

millions of others. Maybe even a few of you were fifth Beatles. Am I wrong?

By now I'm sure you're asking, "what's the point of this trip down nostalgia lane?" The point is simple and self-evident: we humans are wired to live vicariously. We feel, act and experience the world by endless imaginary leaps into the feelings, actions and experiences of others. Especially others who are powerful, or popular, or in some other way symbolize an unattainable otherness that draws us like ants to honey.

One of the more ordinary examples of vicarious living is that of parents living through the accomplishments and passages of their children. I've had the privilege of performing well over a hundred weddings, and without a doubt every bride beams with a kind of radiance that is rare and sublime. More often than not, the bride's mother is also raptured into her own seventh heaven as she stands, faces the narthex and signals to the guests the entrance of her daughter into the sanctuary and down the rose-peddled aisle.

Each of us live vicariously into the future as elderly parents, relatives and friends decline and give up the ghost. It's as though they were the only ones standing between us and the great, eternal abyss that now yawns far and wide.

On one hand, vicarious living is a natural and rewarding experience that connects us, sobers us, and in every way humanizes us through the sympathetic crossing-over of our imaginations into the triumphs and defeats of those around us. On the other hand, vicarious living can become an illusion, a diversion from reality, a refusal to accept the limits of our lives that seem to us so painfully ordinary and unacceptable.

Today's gospel lesson displays both kinds of vicarious living all at once. As Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray, we are told that while he was praying his face was changed, his clothes dazzled and, all of the sudden, Moses and Elijah spoke with our Lord about his "exodus" out of this world that was soon approaching. In this regard, those who represented "the law and the

prophets," the whole of Jesus' tradition, attested to the fact that he was one of them and one-with-them.

Jesus' three companions, who nearly dozed through this grand epiphany, were suddenly stunned beyond belief. Peter James and John were among Jesus' inner circle of disciples, no doubt, but in an instant they went from being faithful students to that of star-struck celebrity hounds. Peter, speaking for them and, dare I say, for us, was adamant: "*Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*" That verse ends with the editorial insertion, "*not knowing what he said,*" but Peter knew darn well what he was saying, what he wanted and what he was willing to do to parlay this once-in-a-lifetime experience into some kind of holy theme park with booths and tourists and profits to be turned. Peter's absorption within the glory of God's son degenerated into a vicarious moment in the sun. Peter basked in the experience of Christ's glory, but he failed to sympathetically enter the experience as a transformative event. At least not right off. That would come a little later.

It is said that after the Beatles had led what was later called the British Invasion, John Lennon would gather Paul, George and Ringo into a circle as they were about to tour, or go into the studio to record yet another series of smash hits, and he would ask them, "boys, where are we going?" All four would allegedly shout, "to the topper most of the popper most!"

Like I said, some of us may be fifth Beatles, but all of us who seek to follow Christ are, without question, thirteenth disciples. Most of us, in one way or another, live within, and are sometimes caught between, these two realms. And we are prone to confuse the realm of Christ with that of our star-struck world. Not unlike Peter, we thirteenth disciples aspire to spiritual vistas where it is good to see and be seen. We thirteenth disciples, like all the others who have gone before us, are called to descend the mountain and share in Christ's passion--even as we dig in our heels and wish, instead, to go to the topper most of the popper most.

I've got some good news and some bad news: The bad news is that Jesus didn't come to earth to set up a fan club; the good news is that Jesus didn't come to earth to set up a fan club.

Whether we hear this as good news or bad news is both a matter of faith and a matter of longing. May our faith lead us gently down the mountains of our own making into the ordinary world of our everyday lives. If we descend during this Lenten season with true longing for God in our hearts, what appears to be ordinary in and around us can be, dare I say, will be, redeemed in a glory that we have yet to comprehend. Amen.