

2nd Sunday in Lent

What is it about the story of the **Transfiguration of Jesus** that haunts us? Why has it beguiled so many artists and poets, and spiritual masters over the centuries? I think it's because it speaks to the very heart of Christian living: *The Mystery and Majesty of who Jesus is.*

Let's move step by step through this wonderful account that we have for this 2nd Sunday of Lent:

Jesus takes his inner circle of disciples: Peter, James, and John and leads them up a high mountain. Now we biblical readers should be accustomed to this by now—mountains in Sacred Scripture are trysting places, places of encounter, meeting points of divinity and humanity. We are going up above our ordinary experience, above the physical and everyday to the properly spiritual realm.

Psychologists in the 20th Century talked about "peak experiences:" times when we feel in contact with God; times when we get the meaning of it all. Perhaps all of us, to some degree, have had this type of experience at some point in our lives. They are rare. They may seem strange. Yet, they are oddly illuminating. They often come out of the blue unexpectedly. We suddenly see! It is a mountain top experience—you see the whole countryside from a mountain. We seem to get it, an AH-HA moment.

We hear that on this mountain Jesus was **transfigured** before them. It is very interesting to look behind that word, *transfigured*—in the Greek it is **metamorphein**. When we hear transfigure, we might think of light, that brilliant light that shown around and through Jesus. But, first we must focus on the meaning of the word metamorphein, or in English metamorphosis.

This word **metamorphosis** means: to go beyond the form. Meta is beyond; morphe is form; to go beyond the form. Think of the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. Think of a tadpole becoming a frog. Think of a seed becoming a flower. They are all forms of metamorphosis. The bright light that we associate with the Transfiguration is a kind of symbol or manifestation of this metamorphosis. Such a rich idea, I think.

The form of Jesus is not left behind. It is **transfigured**; it is **elevated**; it is **changed** into a higher key or register. The caterpillar is not so much lost in the butterfly, it is elevated. The seed isn't destroyed or lost, it is transfigured, elevated into a plant.

The Christian dispensation is not a form of Platonism. It doesn't call for **or** advocate the escape of the soul from the body. That's Plato's theme and Plotinus' theme. It is not the theme of the Bible. We speak in the Creeds of "looking for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

It is **Resurrection** that is prefigured here. In many ways transfiguration and resurrection mean the same thing. They are both types of metamorphosis—an

elevation, an intensification, a transfiguration of the life here below. The risen Jesus is not beyond his body. He is an embodied presence. They touch him. He speaks to them. He eats with them. But, it is a transfigured bodiliness, not an ordinary, this-worldly bodiliness—that is what we are getting at in this account of the Transfiguration.

Jesus is giving them, as it were, a sneak preview of what His Father intends for Him at the Resurrection and what He intends for ALL of us once we pass through the crucible of death.

Again, go back to those organic, natural images because they are very telling. Yes, in a certain way, the seed has to fall to the earth and die, in order that it might be transfigured into the plant. In a certain way, the caterpillar has to die; it has to give way, to allow the butterfly to appear. These lowly, mortal bodies of ours, in a certain way, have to die and give way that this transfigured metamorphosis might happen.

And why are the clothes of Jesus mentioned here? It says that his clothes became dazzlingly white. I think that the clothes represent the external dimensions of life. When we are deeply in touch with God, this communion tends to radiate outward and to make the whole of one's life brilliant. That is why the saints are often depicted with haloes and as illuminating figures. It is as though the beauty and integrity of their lives radiate outward into all that they do. So that it can be seen, it becomes radiant.

Then we hear: "Behold Moses and Elijah appear to them, conversing with Him." These are two of the greatest heroes of Israelite history: Moses representing the Torah, the Law; Elijah representing all of the prophets and prophecy. The point is clear: "all of Israelite salvation history is pointing to **this** moment and to **this** person. Moses and Elijah, the whole of Israelite history, are conversing with Jesus—a most beautiful image is this conversation. Jesus is illuminated by the Old Testament; the Old Testament is illuminated by Jesus." (*Pope Benedict XVI*)

In the first reading from Genesis, we hear about the great rescue mission that **YHWH** launches. He will form a people after His own heart, a people who will know how to walk in His ways and how to praise Him. And this people, we hear over and over again in the O.T., this people will become a beacon to the whole world. All the communities of the earth will find blessing in you; words that are echoed up and down the Old Testament. Mount Zion, the true pole of the earth, there all the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord. Israel, you are the least of nations but you have been chosen for the sake of the nations. A light will go forth, Isaiah tells us, to illumine the whole world.

The point is this: Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah—all of them—are pointing toward Jesus. Who is stationed now on a mountain and who has become dazzlingly white. Do you see it? **He is the beacon!** He is the light to the Nations that Isaiah spoke of. He is the whole point and purpose of Israel now become luminous. He is the fulfillment of YHWH's rescue operation that is Israel.

And the voice coming from the cloud confirms it: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased, LISTEN TO HIM."

Think now of the letter to the Hebrews: we hear there that God spoke in many and fragmentary ways through the prophets. He did, indeed, speak. It was God's voice speaking but in a less than perfect way. But then the author of Hebrews says to us: now in these latter days He has spoken through his Son. It is the definitive and authentic voice of God that is now speaking.

Notice, please, Abraham, the first Israelite, the first of this family that God is forming, he is the one who listened to the voice of God and obeyed. That is the beginning of Israel. Up and down the centuries that is what God is calling Israel to do, is to LISTEN.

In Deuteronomy 6, we hear the Shemah Prayer: Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is God alone. LISTEN. St. Paul says in the New Testament: Faith comes from hearing—when you LISTEN to God.

The tragedy, of course, is that Israel largely did not listen.

Now the voice of God has become a human voice in the beloved Son. And the Father says, summing up ALL salvation history: "LISTEN TO HIM."

This is why Peter, speaking for the three who are on the mountain, speaking for the twelve, speaking for all of Israel and the whole human race, says: "Lord, it is good that we are here."

Do you see the power of it? It is not just, oh how wonderful that we are having this interesting mystical experience—Peter there is speaking for every single human being up and down the centuries. How good it is that we are here, that we are listening to the voice of God.

When they hear the divine voice, the disciples, it says, fell prostrate. It is not just because they are overwhelmed and afraid, that's true. But, additionally, prostration is the attitude of worship. They know where they are now—not merely in the presence of one more prophet—not merely in the presence of another figure in the long history of salvation—they are now lying prostrate in the presence of the very summation of the whole of Israel—the whole of Salvation History.

My dear brothers and sisters, we are meant in this holy Season of Lent to stop, be quiet, and prostrate, at least, our hearts before Our Transfigured Lord and LISTEN to Him. Take time to open the Scriptures and LISTEN. Spend time in prayer and LISTEN.