

Sunday next before Lent

Luke 9: 28-36

(Exodus 34:29-end; 2 Cor 3:12-4:2)

People do, from time to time, come out with the oddest of remarks - remarks which clearly show that they really hadn't thought carefully about what they were saying. And in our Gospel reading today, we find that *here*, in the midst of this awesome and mysterious event which we call the Transfiguration, we find the apostle Peter coming out with the oddest of remarks - "Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah – *not* knowing what he said.'" No doubt Peter was so overawed by what he was experiencing that he simply didn't know how to respond. He really couldn't grasp what this was all about, and so in the heat of the moment, he simply comes out with this comment about putting up some tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. If *we* put *ourselves* in Peter's place, though, we probably would not have reacted much differently. Because what Peter witnessed on that

holy mountain was something which is truly beyond our everyday experience.

Now in order to grasp the real significance of the Transfiguration we have to look at this event in the wider context of chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel. Because underlying this whole section of the Gospel is the basic question, 'Who exactly is this Jesus of Nazareth?' And it all climaxes in the question Jesus puts to the disciples themselves, "...who do *you* say that I am?", to which Peter responds with that great declaration, "The Messiah/the Christ of God." It's that crucial moment in the Gospel narrative where the real truth about who Jesus is, is revealed to his disciples. And soon after this key declaration, we get this extraordinary event of the Transfiguration. Because the Transfiguration is the ultimate statement on the matter. Here the declaration of Christ's true identity is made by God the Father himself - "...from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'" At Christ's baptism in the river Jordan, at the very beginning of his ministry, God had declared Jesus to

be the Messiah in a similar manner, and now this truth is underlined here once again.

So, first and foremost, the Transfiguration speaks to us definitively of the true identity of Jesus. The cloud, the voice from heaven and the glorious change in Christ's appearance all testify to who he *is*. So, we read of Peter, James and John seeing Christ's *glory*. Back in the Old Testament, glory is a characteristic of God himself, and now this glory is seen in his Son Jesus Christ. Christ shares the nature of God the Father - he's not just another man, but truly God made man. When we see Jesus, we see God. And then there's the cloud. In the Old Testament, the cloud is a visible sign of the presence of God. And so *here* again, the cloud is a visible sign of God's presence on the holy mountain, and from that cloud breaks through the divine voice, testifying to the divinity of Jesus Christ. The extraordinary event of the Transfiguration shows us that the key claim of the Christian faith that Jesus is fully God and fully man - is not based on mere intellectual speculation, or the flights of fancy of theologians.

Rather it's a truth which is grounded in reality – in experience. God the Father himself has revealed it, and the apostles provide eyewitness testimony to this.

Then secondly, in the Transfiguration, God the Father assures his Son of the necessity of the Cross. When we look back again at the text immediately preceding the account of this event, we find that, following Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ the Messiah of God, Jesus himself goes on to describe what being the Messiah was to mean for him – he says, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” His suffering and death on the Cross were to be the climax of his ministry. And when he went up on the mountain to pray, he was probably pondering the magnitude of the suffering which he was to undergo - was this really the path he was to follow - was this the way he was meant to go? And in the Transfiguration, God the Father provides his Son with that affirmation that yes, this is indeed the path

he must follow. So, when Moses and Elijah appear in glory and talk with Jesus, Luke notes that they “were speaking of his *departure*, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” In *their* time, both Moses and Elijah - the great figures of the Old Testament - had been trying to lead the people of Israel to righteousness. But now, Christ, through his death on the Cross would accomplish for *all* people (and not just for the people of Israel) what Moses and Elijah could not. In the Transfiguration we catch a brief glimpse of Christ’s glory, but his ultimate glory was beyond death.

And in the same way, if we are sincerely wanting to follow the way of the Lord, then *we* too have to take up *our* cross daily and follow him. The Christian faith is not about escaping from the harsh realities of life, but rather about walking closely with Jesus through all the ups and downs we face; it’s about walking in the way of the Cross. Of course, this is *not* a particularly attractive proposition. In fact, Peter’s strange comment about making three dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, probably reflected the fact

that he really wanted to hold onto this ‘nice’ moment in which the eternal glory of Jesus is momentarily revealed - for him, it was so much more desirable to the idea of Jesus suffering on a cross. But that moment was not to last forever; they had to eventually come down from that glorious mountain-top experience and journey with Christ to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die. The thing is, the Christian life is certainly *not* one long series of ‘nice’ moments. If we sincerely want to follow Christ, then we too have to go through those trials and difficulties in life in order to win the crown; it’s not about instant glory.

And finally, reflecting upon the Transfiguration causes us to consider to what extent Christ’s *glory* is reflected in *our* lives. In our Old Testament reading from Exodus, we read of Moses’ face shining after meeting with God, such that he had to put a veil over his face when he met with the people; in fact, he didn’t even realise his face was shining. The radiance of God’s glory was reflected in the face of Moses. In the same way, if *we* have encountered God through

his Son, is the radiance of *Christ's* glory truly reflected in *our* lives? Having met with the Lord in worship, do we then leave this place changed, transformed, transfigured even, so that others may see Christ's glory reflected in and through *us*? Because as the apostle Paul reminds us in our reading from 2 Corinthians, if we have truly encountered the Lord, then we "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

So, the Transfiguration speaks to us powerfully of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Son, as no one else is; the only appropriate response is to listen to *him*. It reminds us of the necessity of the Cross and *our* need, in turn, to take up *our* cross daily and follow the Lord. And it reminds us that it must be our desire, as today's collect puts it, to "be changed into his [Christ's] likeness, from glory to glory".

Let us pray:

'As we gaze on your kingly brightness.

So our faces display your likeness.

Ever changing from glory to glory,

Mirrored here may *our* lives tell *your* story.'

In Jesus' name. Amen.