2nd Sunday in Lent 2023

Some time ago, I watched a television programme which dealt with the work carried out in a hospital Emergency Department. An elderly lady, accompanied by her husband, both in their eighties, was being treated in one of the cubicles. When the doctor went out, the couple sat in silence, the old man just looking at his wife. She said to him, “When you look at me like that, are you feeling sorry for me?” He replied, “No. I was thinking that you are still a beautiful woman.” And her face lit up. It was a profoundly human moment – but also had something of the transcendent about it. I have often noticed something similar in the moment a bride arrives before the Altar, and the groom turns and beholds her for the first time in her wedding gown – again, beautifully human, but also transcendent. Something similar can also be witnessed as a spouse sits by the bedside of a dying loved one, “holding hands”, in the words of Seamus Heaney, “never closer the whole rest of our lives” *(The Haw Lantern: Clearances 3).*

We have all experienced such moments; perhaps it was falling in love; or the birth of a child; or holding a grandchild in your arms for the first time; maybe it was the First Holy Communion of a son or daughter; or when a Bible passage suddenly came alive; or the simple realisation of life’s many blessings. If we fail to appreciate those human but transcendent moments, it will be difficult to understand and enter into to today’s Gospel passage. It is in remembering these transcendent moments that we realise that God has come close to us and has touched our lives.

Today's Gospel passage tells not only the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, it also tells something of our story too. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain, and there they caught a glimpse of his glory, *“his face shone like the sun”*. But what actually happened on Mount Tabor; what was it that the apostles witnessed? They saw a man at one with God. Jesus is not only divine, but he is also truly human; he had a human body, and was *“like us in all things but sin” (Heb.4.15).*  He revealed what it is to be perfectly human, beautifully human, as God had intended from the beginning – speaking of the creation of humanity scripture says, *“God created them in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them……and God saw it was very good” (Gen.1: 27, 31).*

It was the glory of Jesus' perfect humanity which shone out in the presence of his Father – this was the glory which the Apostles glimpsed. They, however, *“fell on their faces, overcome with fear”,* because, when confronted with perfection, they recognised that they were limited by a thousand shortcomings. Yet, Jesus was teaching them to be unlimited in their yearnings for perfection, as they too were destined for glory. He teaches us the same, because what he once promised his disciples, he promises you and me, *“The upright will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt.13:43).* This is the significance of the Transfiguration; it is the moment for which the whole of life prepares us.

Perhaps it is surprising to learn that the Transfiguration was a revelation of perfect humanity rather perfect divinity? Jesus himself, as he came down from Mount Tabor, directed the Apostles as to where his divinity would be seen; he said, *“Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.”* It was by his sufferings and shameful death on the cross, and in the wonder of his resurrection, that Jesus fully revealed the divine glory of God.

The scene on Mount Tabor offers a striking parallel to the scene on the Hill of Calvary. On one, Jesus is seen in glory; on the other, he is humiliated. On Tabor his clothes are *“as white as light”*; on Calvary he is stripped naked. On the mountain he is flanked by two great religious figures, Moses, and Elijah; on the Cross, there is a thief on either side of him. On Tabor, *“a bight cloud covered them”*; on Good Friday, *“there was darkness over all the land”*. Peter, beholding the vision of Jesus transfigured blurts out *“it is wonderful for us to be here”*; but he is not at Calvary, he hides in shame, having denied his Lord. At the Transfiguration the Father declared *“This is my Son, the beloved...”*; beneath the Cross it is a pagan soldier who declared “*this man was indeed the Son of God.”*

This experience of the majesty of God shining through the humanity of Jesus was intended to strengthen the faith of the apostles and to brace them for the coming crisis of the crucifixion. In our lives, Jesus, allows us also to catch a glimpse of his glory. These “transfiguration” experiences in our lives are worth recalling, moments, the memory of which lifts our spirits and enables us to persevere when we too come to Calvary, darkness and suffering.

*“Lord Jesus,*

*may we stand in your presence without fear,*

*and yearn to hear your Father’s voice say,*

*‘You are my beloved children.’”* **Amen.**