

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent 2021

There is a line in one of the Psalms which cries out, “*It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide not your face.*” Each time I read this line, I wonder, “What did Jesus’ face really look like?” Strangely, the Gospels say little about Jesus’ physical appearance. In the year 2000, The National Gallery in London, hosted an extraordinary art exhibition which explored the challenges which faced Christian artists down the ages as they attempted to portray an image of Christ.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, we traditionally read one of the accounts of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Today, we read St Mark’s account, which tells us nothing about the physical appearance of Jesus; St Matthew, however, in his version of the Transfiguration, notes that Jesus’ face “*shone like the sun*”. The only other references in the Gospels to the face of Jesus are found in the passion accounts; St John records that one of the High Priest’s guards “*gave Jesus a slap in the face*” (Jn.18:22); both Matthew and Mark tell us that those same guards “*spat in his face*” (Mt.26:69; Mk.14:65). These references emphasise, more than anything else, the tragic and abused beauty of Christ’s face. Yet, for the faithful, it is in these ugly moments, and particularly in the ugliest of them all, the crucifixion, that Christ’s beauty is most visible - the beauty of infinite love.

The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a famous sermon, said, “There met in Jesus Christ all that can make man lovely and loveable”,

and went on to say, “I look forward with eager desire to seeing the matchless beauty of Christ’s body in the heavenly light....yet, far higher than beauty of the body comes the beauty of his character” (*cf Gerald O’Collins SJ, Jesus a Portrait; p14*). This is the beauty that must surely have been the experienced by Peter, James, and John as they saw Jesus transfigured. As I read the Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration, I am always struck by how little the Evangelists tell us about that extraordinary event. Today's Gospel passage simply says, “*his clothes became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them.*” Perhaps they are just lost for words, as beauty cannot be adequately described, but must be experienced.

For the three disciples, the experience on the mountain was to prepare them for the trial that would be endured on that other hill, the Hill of Calvary. This vision of the transfigured and radiantly beautiful Lord, which anticipated his resurrection, prepared them for the trauma of his passion and death. St. Catherine of Siena, that great mystic of the fourteenth century, sums up that which was realised by the disciples after the resurrection; she writes: “The Cross would not have been enough to hold him, nor the earth enough to keep the Cross upright, nor the nails enough to keep him nailed fast to the Cross, unless love had held him there first!” Then she declares, “What indescribable love!” (*Letter T*)

The vision of the Lord transfigured was a gracious gift to the three

disciples, and as we reflect on the Gospel account, it becomes a gift to us. Just as Jesus allowed Peter, James, and John to catch a glimpse of his glory, we, today, are invited to call to mind those occasions when we too caught a glimpse of his beauty. We have all had particular transfiguration moments in our lives; perhaps it was the experience of falling in love; or the birth of a child; or the joy of friendship; a first Holy Communion; maybe amazing scenery, or wonderful music; or an occasion in the silence of the church when the heart was flooded with gratitude. These are moments when we can cry out with Peter, “*Lord, it is wonderful for us to be here*”. Let us be attentive to these moments because it is in remembering them that we come to appreciate beauty as a gift through which God touches our lives. Someone has said, “Beauty is the smile on the face of God!” This is true, because the memory of these moments lifts our spirits and enables us to persevere – particularly when the cross weighs heavy upon us.

In so many ways our Lord touches our lives and seeks to transform us, to awaken us to his presence and his love. Perhaps in this Lenten season, the sharpest challenge to our faith is to recognise beauty in the weak and suffering people of our world. It is clear from the Gospel that Jesus identifies himself particularly with them. His passion continues in them, but the beauty of his love is revealed to them through our caring response to their need. Today, we are to be the face of Christ in the world!

*“Lord Jesus,  
for all who give you a face,  
by spreading your love in the world,  
we praise you.  
For all who reveal you  
simply by what they are,  
we praise you,  
because they reflect your beauty in their lives.” Amen*