

## Homily for the Transfiguration of Our Lord

(Sunday, August 8, 2010)

*Fr. Rylan notes that he does, at times, take liberties with the text during the preaching, so this text may not be exactly the same as delivered.*

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How does one begin to explain what unfolded before the apostles' eyes on the mountain top, an event we have come to call the Transfiguration of The Lord? I suppose we could try and define "transfiguration." When I looked at one dictionary it said: "to change the appearance of a person or thing so that they look more beautiful." Feeling this was a bit too "fashion magazine", I checked another publisher who defined "transfigure" as: "to change so as to glorify or exalt." Theologically speaking this latter one is not half bad.

But surely it doesn't fully capture what happened. Even the gospel writer's words barely do it justice. You can hear Luke pushing the envelope of our post-modern intellect as he clumsily scribbles what Peter, James and John have likewise clumsily relayed to him: "And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed...." How does it change? He doesn't say. Perhaps he can't say – there are no similes or metaphors available to him a moment such as this.

He goes on: "...and his clothes became dazzling white...." This is spiritual code for an unnatural brilliance that cannot be described. An experience that lies outside of the senses of this world yet somehow intersects with them. We find this type of language employed in the writings of the great mystics of the Church such as S. Teresa of Avila and S. Julian of Norwich.

Continuing on Luke says, "Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him...." So now there are long-dead prophets standing there chatting with him. Naturally we are curious. We want to know why they are there and what it could mean. Well, many books have been written proposing what these figures allude to. But I don't want us to go down the road of "why." I want us to remain silent before the event unfolding before us. If we notice anything, be aware of what they are discussing. Luke tells us that they are "...speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

This is a watershed moment for both the disciples and for Jesus. The apostles are witnessing something that no theological tome can capture; no rational mind can figure out for it is a phenomenon that lies within the mystical and experiential.

I had an inkling of this just two and a half weeks ago when I found myself standing atop the

summit of a mountain in the heart of the Rockies. Irene and I, along with a couple of our friends, took a seven and a half hour hike up Robertson Glacier to Burstall Pass. By the time we reached the Pass, we were just shy of 2400 metres above sea level or approximately 7874 feet. Before you are impressed, the hike started at about 3500 feet.

Tired and sore, standing there above the snow line (and yes, we enjoyed throwing snowballs at each other in the middle of July), each one stood transfixed at the vista before us. Less oxygen wasn't the only thing that took our breath away. If you asked me to describe in words the experience itself I could come up with, "overwhelming," "intimidating," "awesome," or "eerily peaceful" but none of these do any justice to what we were gazing upon.

I suspect that day upon another mountain top in Israel, a similar phenomenon, magnified a hundred-fold, was pouring through Peter, James and John as they looked upon an epiphany of God that only heart and soul could comprehend. It was a moment when they didn't just realize, but experienced Jesus of Nazareth to be more the eternal Son of God in whom the fullness of the glory of God dwelt – a glory that had embraced the unspectacular and mundane and transfigured it.

There are two extraordinary realities that arise from the Transfiguration. The first is that God is going to allow himself to die. Luke of course describes it as "his departure", but we know better. We have hindsight to our advantage. We know what "departure" means for Jesus.

It is awe-inspiring just to think that God experiences the trials and triumphs of human life but to also walk through that most inevitable reality of mortal existence, the gate of death leaves one breathless.

The second extraordinary reality arising from the Transfiguration is declared by S. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another..."

In the Transfiguration of Our Lord, James, Peter and John were witnessing what they themselves were to become as his disciples. Something every Christian can relate to as in baptism we put on the transfiguration of Christ and embark upon the process of being transfigured by the glory of God in Christ.

This is what St. Paul is getting at when he describes the Christian life as a journey upon which we are daily crucified to the flesh as Christ is born in us. More and more, as we bask in the light of the Son his glory grows in our hearts and souls, transfiguring our thoughts, our actions, our

words, indeed our whole being until all that is left is Christ himself.

This can only happen because the glory of the Father descended to the very creation he had brought into being. Which means the Transfiguration lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It glimmers in the night sky at the incarnation. It is revealed in the life death and certainly resurrection of Jesus. It shines forth in the Spirit of Pentecost and thus serves as the foundation of Christian life and witness.

In the words of Archbishop Michael Ramsey:

Herein lies the meaning of the Church. It is the mystery of the participation of men and women in the glory that is Christ's. Baptized into his death and made sharers in his resurrection they become members of Christ's Body...Here the Father is glorified by the fruitfulness of the disciples. Here, too, men and women are glorified, even as they are called and justified. Here they are being transformed into Christ's image from glory to glory as by the sovereign Spirit....there is the truth about the Church's essential being, namely that the glory of Christ is there.

A final thought as we sit with the apostles upon the mountain top in wonder. The glory we witness is the glory of Christ crucified – the reason why the Church has built altars upon the “hills” rather than leave them blank. We dare not forget what we overheard Our Lord speaking about to Elijah and Moses.

And since our glory is his glory ... well, you know what I'm getting at. But perhaps it is this awareness that our humiliations, griefs and pains are all wrapped up in the crucified glory of the Eternal Son that keeps us both humble yet able to delight in Christ even in their midst.