

LENTEN STUDY 3 THE TRANSFIGURATION 2013

At Jesus' birth, a perplexed Mary had seen *glory* in the cow shed at Bethlehem. At his presentation in the Temple, the aged Simeon had clasped the baby bundle of Good News and said "My eyes have seen the *glory*." (But then he delivered the Bad News that the Babe would be rejected and a sword of sorrow would pierce Mary' heart. Luke 2:33). It is now *thirty-three years later*. After three years' ministry, it is Jesus' turn to be troubled; his mind was near breaking point as he realized the nightmarish fate before him. He had read of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah and applied that to himself; he knew now that he was to be rejected and die a shocking, degrading death on a cross. To give life *to* the world, he must give his life *for* the world as an example. He must give an example of acceptance of a horrible death for the sake of those who face pain-filled futures, who face drastic decisions made about them, who face a painful death. He knew, too, he must accept unjust punishment to break the ancient law of retaliation, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." He knew he had to die crying "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they do." (If only the world leaders had prayed like this after 9:11; for example, "Father, we do not know why these people have flown planes into our buildings, but we will try to understand and forgive..." how different the world might be).

Was it to garner some mental comfort that Jesus took his special three disciples, Peter, James and John to the mountain top? Yet, on the mountain, when he looked for support from his close friends, Jesus found he was quite alone in his agony of mind. How could he gain comfort from these sleepy-heads when they were completely bubble-wrapped in their own narrow, naïve notion of his kingly future. They were already squabbling for important places as royal princes next to him when he would take his kingdom. Jesus would even suffer the mother of James and John, Mary's sister Auntie Salome, buttonholing him with demands for these very places, Nephew! In their dullness, the disciples could not understand that a cross, not a crown, awaited him. He will not be a warrior king, but the disciples cannot fathom this. They are on an anti-Roman roll. They want a military champion who will march to Holy Zion (Jerusalem) to the people's chant "Hosanna to the Son of David!" and scourge the oppressive Roman occupiers out! Jesus set up the

Transfiguration as a pro-active measure to try to assist the disciples to an awareness of what the reality would be.

On the mountain, with no earthly help to strengthen him, God stepped in to encourage the Son to take the terrible road to the waiting wood of the Cross. When Jesus was at near breaking-point, God caused to appear Moses and Elijah, to talk with him about his unmerited death, and strengthen him as he learned more of the destiny he would fulfil in Jerusalem for all humanity. When alive, both Moses and Elijah had been misunderstood, treated with ingratitude and driven out into the lonely wilderness. Having accidentally killed an Egyptian, the cultured Moses had fled the comforts of Pharaoh's court, where he could easily have been absolved of his crime. Identifying wholly with his enslaved Hebrew people, and, to await the call of God, Moses fled into the wilderness for forty years. (Forty years? Was God in no hurry to free God's people?) Ultimately, Moses delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Giving the Chosen People the Law, he led them to their Promised Land as Jesus will lead his people *from* the bondage of enslaving sin. In Matthew's Gospel, Moses pre-figured Jesus, when as a babe after Herod's death, Jesus came out of Egypt (to return to Nazareth) to one-day deliver his people from their bondage to the enslaving Law. He will teach them the New Law of loving kindness in such discourses as the Sermon on the Mount.

There appeared on the mountain also a rough man from the wilderness, Elijah. As the first and greatest of the prophets, he had challenged the false religion of his day. The horrid Queen Jezebel had killed all Israel's priests except Elijah, and installed her favoured priests of Baal. Intent on taking his life, he fled from Jezebel to the desert, hounded, frightened and depressed. There, an angel ministered to him and he was energised with the strength of that meal to go on for forty days to the Mount of God, where he learned that there were many in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

The two had appeared as an expression of oneness with Jesus in his mission. They spoke of his "Exodus," his passing (from the human state to what resembled the godly-glory). Like Jesus, in life, neither Moses nor Elijah had a sympathetic ear to turn to, except God-in-heaven, in whom, through their unswerving loyalty, they found support and strength. Like Jesus, both knew what it was like to be alone. There is a strange similarity about their deaths. It

seems that Moses died alone with God, “but no one knows his burial place to this day.” (Deut. 34:5) Elijah took his departure in a chariot and horses of fire and ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. (2 Kings. 2:11) The two were the best helps for Jesus to steel and reassure him to go on to Calvary, where he would transform his fear into acceptance (helped by such as the counsel of Mary of Bethany, who, as he tumbled out his terror of impending death, nodded encouragement for him to see the passion through, and the few faithful women who remained at the Cross.) On the mountain, the two God-sent comforters helped Jesus to show us how we may bear unwarranted distress and perplexing suffering NOT in uncertainty and alone, but in the surety of God’s powerful presence. Then the two heavenly visitors disappeared. That is, the preparatory Mosaic Law and the Prophets had been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. Now the disciples may look to no one but Jesus.

Then came the words from the overshadowing cloud of God, the same words as at the beginning of his mission at his baptism, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (Matt. 17:5) If only the world had listened! The world could be transfigured instead of constantly disfigured. Peter had not wanted to listen earlier. When Jesus had first let on that a shameful cross awaited him, Peter had rebuked him, “Heaven forbid! This must not happen to you!” (Matt. 16:22)

While Jesus was conversing with the heavenly pair, the disciples had nearly fallen asleep only to suddenly wake to the glory. Once again, poor benighted Peter missed the point. When he saw the *shekinah*, the glow of God’s presence envelop Jesus, when he saw Jesus’ sandy-brown Bedouin clothes shimmer translucently, dumbfounded, he cried, “Let us make three booths” (Jewish succas) and remain up here and never again face the everyday world of pain and suffering and struggle down below in the valley. He wanted to video the picture so he could enjoy endless replays. “Hold it! Let’s keep the vision of glory like this!” After any mountain-top experience, we cannot cry “Wow! This is the life! Let’s keep it just like this!” We have to ignore the Peters to face the realities and responsibilities that come our way down in the valley. We may wish to prolong the moment, but life must go on in a routine way. We have to go down the mountain to where the troubled people are. Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, but disfigured on the Cross at street-level. Life is

seldom all airy-fairy mountain-top happiness. The Mount of Transfiguration experience was given to strengthen Jesus and his disciples to come down to ordinary daily ministry. We have to descend to street-level to find Jesus carrying his cross to a rubbish-tip called Calvary. We have to go on living in the valley of discovery, where often we are denied the luxury of visions, where, with Moses, we may be rejected and opposed for a golden calf. We have to go on living in the valley, where, with Elijah, we are left to feel absolutely abandoned and alone by those from whom you may have sought help. We will be buoyed by the truth that Jesus has been along that stretch before, and is with us now, and will step in with you, step for step, on your journey.

And more. Because he did it so well, death could not contain him. What happened? By renunciation after renunciation, he emptied himself of any selfish will, any self-seeking. (Philippians 2: 6-11) The vacuum was in-filled with love, and the grave could not contain him. He passed through death and burst forth on Easter Day completely transformed into perfect love, a life-love-power he now wills to send into everyone as we move along questioning, faltering, to the next stage of being fashioned into the nearest thing to Jesus we can possibly be. In the power of the Risen Jesus, we can go out into the ordinary circumstances of the ordinary lives of those around us to transform what has been deformed, to transfigure what has been disfigured, singing, "Finish then, your new creation, pure and spotless let us be. Let us see your great salvation perfectly restored in thee. Changed from glory into glory."

The disciple must follow in the footsteps of the Master. We must go up the mountain to the presence of God to begin the painful process of transfiguration into true disciples, but we do not remain there in the mountain-top grandeur. Having received the strength of God, we must come down to go on, to live our lives where God calls us and places us. We cannot live forever in the moment on the mountain, but we cannot live at all without it. The disciples were "heavy with sleep, and (*only*) when they rubbed their eyes they saw his glory" (Luke 9: 32). Set in our ways, are our minds sometimes closed in sleep? Are we mentally lazy? Are we quite happy to settle for our pet notions, (for example, our attitude to our students' parents, who have saddled themselves with crippling mortgages and the concomitant problems,) without really thinking them through (as we may follow a slimming plan from a glossy

magazine “Take off a kilo a day for a year!”) without thinking through the consequences? Putting ourselves out for them may be time-consuming, tiring and draining, but we are the only ones that Jesus has at Overnewton ready to transfigure their disfigurements into glory. Being unsympathetic may keep us nearly asleep. We don’t want to feel sympathy for someone in distress; perhaps we need our heart to be broken to realize the need of the other. A loveless life may keep us asleep. Everyone of us is God’s unique and unrepeatable experiment; we are one of a kind, and God does not make mistakes. God has a dream, a plan that only we can do. We may sleep on selfishly like the disciples and not become aware of our wonderful worth and miss seeing his glory. Unlike the disciples, who were caught up within themselves, we are asked this Lent to be a Moses or Elijah or the faithful women who companioned their dying lord on Calvary. Through their and Jesus’ acceptance of unmerited pain and suffering came nobility of character. Lent is our time to climb to find out the best vantage points of life so that we can get the best views on eternal life.

The Revd Walter McEntee