

20170806Transfiguration_Sermon

You've heard the Gospel reading describing what the Church calls The Transfiguration. What happened up Mt Tabor is simply told by Luke in his gospel, but I must admit that perhaps a non-Christian who reads this might be thinking, "I wonder what those disciples were smoking!" Let me summarise, I hope as simply as Luke: Jesus climbed to the top of a mountain to pray and he took three disciples with him. They saw what happened. While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Jesus, the man they knew took on a look they had never seen before. Even his clothes became luminous.

Then two men became visible beside Jesus and they turned out to be Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest heroes in Jewish history. The three of them talked together and they all gave off a radiance that set them apart from the rest of humanity. Peter, John, and James are witnessing a very high-level conversation. I wonder what **they** thought? Did what Moses, Elijah and Jesus talked about have anything to do with those disciples? Did it deal with the fate of the universe? Or perhaps, with God's plan for rescuing all of us from ourselves?

Luke does give us a glimpse into their conversation. He says: ³¹*They ... were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. The text continues, "But since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him... Just as they were leaving him, 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.'" Moses and Elijah were in the act of leaving Jesus when Peter tried to stop everything and install each of them in their own chapel. Now, this is an interesting response, and also such a human response – I can certainly identify with it.*

I think what happened was so out of Peter's normal life and that he wanted to get it organized and into a familiar pattern in order to feel settled. Thinking about that response from Peter made me ask myself, 'How much of religion is motivated by impulses like Peter's rather than the mysterious moving of the Spirit as God searches to make contact with us.' Think of times you might have experienced someone speaking in tongues or being slain by the spirit. What thoughts went through your head? How did you respond? Was it any different from Peter's in this event? Three great authorities in Peter's Jewish life, surely he wanted them tamed and in their containers where they can be trusted just like we would perhaps want to do with the Holy Spirit. That's the down side to spiritual growth. You find yourself going to places that are new and that you never thought you would see and that is scary.

Luke wrote this episode in Jesus' life aware that we, the reader, know something Peter didn't yet know. We know what the three **are** talking about. They are discussing "how" Jesus completes what Moses and Elijah began. Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets. We who read this story today, know about the crucifixion and resurrection. So, we know something that Peter could not know at that moment. We know that Jesus' ministry will culminate in Jerusalem where Jesus "accomplishes his departure."

While Peter is babbling on, a cloud begins to overshadow them. There is an Old Testament precedent, the cloud that overshadowed Moses on the mountain and produced the Ten Commandments which is the defining document of the Jewish community. Now a cloud is threatening to overshadow them! When Moses came down the mountain after his encounter with God in a cloud, his face was so bright people couldn't look at it. Now this same cloud was enveloping them.

Luke says: *"They were terrified as they entered the cloud."* They must have thought, 'Will we survive this? We aren't holy like Moses.' Was God's ominous and ambivalent presence about to consume them? The cloud settled in around them. They were inescapably in its fog. Then from the cloud came a voice that says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" In my bible translation, the words "Son" and "Chosen" are capitalized and the sentence ends with an exclamation mark.

But the words are gentle. They contain no condemnation. The cloud and whomever it hid had no hostility toward them. The voice had one simple message. **Jesus is God's Son, God's Chosen; the one to listen to.** [Rpt] Jesus completes and takes precedence over Moses and Elijah. Instead of Moses' Ten Commandments, there is but one. "Listen to Jesus!"

Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. The law tries to change our behaviour from the outside but cannot change our hearts. The prophets warn us against the ways we co-opt the law and sacrifice the weak to benefit the strong. But Jesus goes beyond both, by showing us a way to change our hearts and refrain from sacrificing any at all. This is what Moses, Elijah and Jesus had been discussing before the cloud arrived. The "how" of this is the part Peter missed.

Seventy two years ago, on the 6th of August, the Feast of the Transfiguration, another great and luminous light shown in this world. Unfortunately, this bright luminous light was more-or-less the exact opposite of the presence of God which was the Transfiguration. On this day in 1945 the United States, led by President Truman, dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in Japan. Three days later another bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. There were certainly reasons to do this. It certainly shortened the war, saved Allied lives, and showed the West's strength to those who were opposed to Western democratic governments.

This is part of the so-called just war theory but can this theory truly justify the use of a weapon which cannot discriminate between soldiers and non-combatants? We are all fearful of being caught up in a terrorist attack or perhaps the danger of rogue nations, such as North Korea, having weapons of mass destruction but we tend to forget that the two most devastating usages of weapons of mass destruction were from a Western free nation.

In September 1945, Dorothy Day, an American socialist who was a Roman Catholic and editor of the Catholic Worker magazine wrote a column concerning the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan. It was pretty brave to publish this column in the midst of all of the celebrations taking place because the war was now over and the troops were coming home and America had proven its strength and won the victory. But she points out so powerfully that, as Christians, we have to look at not only the returning troops but also the vaporized Japanese as our brothers and sisters. And in that light, jubilation was sorely out of place. She wrote: *Mr. Truman was jubilant. President Truman. True man; what a strange name, come to think of it. We refer to Jesus Christ as true God and true Man. Truman is a true man of his time in that he was jubilant. He was not a son of God, brother of Christ, brother of the Japanese, jubilating as he did. He went from table to table on the cruiser which was bringing him home from the Big Three conference, telling the great news; "jubilant" the newspapers said. Jubilate Deo. We have killed 318,000 Japanese. That is, we hope we have killed them, the Associated Press, on page one, column one of the Herald Tribune, says. The effect is hoped for, not known. It is to be hoped they are vaporized, our Japanese brothers — scattered, men, women and babies, to the four winds, over the seven seas. Perhaps we will breathe their dust into our nostrils, feel them in the fog of New York on our faces, feel them in the rain on the hills of Easton. Jubilate Deo. President Truman was jubilant. We have created. We have created destruction.*

I wonder how you respond to this column 72 years later. I suspect that you will be divided. Some of you are most probably horrified by the use of the atomic bomb. You find it shocking to imagine it was ever considered. But I am also sure a large number of you, although uncomfortable with the idea of using the bomb, end up saying something like, "But we HAD to use the bomb. If we hadn't, the war would have dragged on, we may have lost it, or we may have lost Europe to the communists while we were fighting in Japan." Of course, all of these were possible outcomes in the choice to use a weapon of mass destruction.

But there is one definite outcome of the decision. By approving the use of weapons of mass destruction, we allow the end to justify the means, willing to kill the innocent in order to secure the world as we **think** it should be. For Christians, especially, that is a deep betrayal of our most basic values, and of our trust in God's providential care of history. If we kill the innocent to preserve our way of life, haven't we already betrayed the life we think is our goal? Isn't it similar to Peter's response on the Mount? Peter on top of Mt Tabor, leapt in and suggested building dwelling places for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. He was scared of change, scared his way of life was being threatened. Doesn't our response 72 years ago to drop the bomb have a certain resonance to Peter's response — preserving the status quo as we see it?

Luke says: *When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.* The three disciples had heard all they needed. The revelation was complete. Instead of wrath to brace against, they discover nothing but benevolence and the instruction to "Listen to Jesus." Listen to Jesus as he teaches non-retaliation and then enacts the suffering it entails. Listen to Jesus as he talks to those who no one will talk to. Listen to Jesus as he tells us to love our enemies; if we listen long enough we will discover we are the enemy he loves.

Based on a sermon by Thomas L. Truby, and a blog by Dana Dillion