

Dear Friends,

The Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Lent is the account of Christ's Transfiguration, which we keep as a feast on 6th August. I was interested to discover that this is the reading in the traditional Latin Mass, which suggests that the association with the day is an ancient one, going back many centuries. Why should we read this story on this day of Lent?

There is an eerie coincidence about the date 6th August: the brilliant radiance of Christ's appearance to his disciples on the hillside is perversely echoed by the blinding flash of the explosion of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in Japan on the same date in 1945, which led to so many painful deaths. I used regularly to go on this day to a village in the Chilterns called Turville (one of the good things about living on the west side of London is that you can get into nearby countryside reasonably quickly, about 45 minutes in this case). The local vicar of the Anglican parish began a custom of holding prayers for peace in his church at 4 pm every day and people would come to keep this cycle of prayer going: a friend of mine at Douai abbey in Berkshire brought a group on pilgrimage from his parish on the feast-day, and I sometimes used to meet them at Turville. On a hot summer day it was a quiet, peaceful spot, but we knew of course that our world is still in many places torn apart by war and violence, and so prayer for peace is constantly needed.

Overlooking the village is a hill with a disused windmill on the top, which we sometimes walked up, thinking of Peter, James and John climbing with Jesus to the top of the hill where they were to see him transfigured in glory. They scarcely knew what to make of this vision, or the appearance with Jesus of Moses and Elijah, symbols of the religious traditions of Judaism, the Law and the Prophets. Peter seems to think they are on a pleasant outing in the hills and suggests making three tents, one for each of them, to shelter from the sun (it makes one think also of the Jewish festival of Sukkoth, when people make tents or booths reminiscent of the temporary dwellings that farmers would live in when gathering the harvest). Then almost as soon as they received the vision it was taken away, as a cloud covered them and a voice was heard, saying 'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him,' and Jesus was there alone in his usual state. I think it is often the case in our lives that times of intense insight can be very brief and soon dispelled, but somehow they endure, they remain important as we go into a darker spell.

Coming down from the mountain Jesus warned them not to tell anyone what they had seen until he had risen from the dead. The Gospel says they followed this instruction, but among themselves wondered what rising from the dead might mean.

Visitors to the Holy Land will often be taken to Mount Tabor, near Nazareth, said

to be the site of this event. It is a striking looking hill which really stands out against the surrounding flat land. These days little buses take you to the top along a winding road, but Jesus and his disciples would have had an arduous climb over several hours. There is a fine Franciscan church with gardens on the summit of Mount Tabor and spectacular views of the land around.

Another tradition, however, locates this episode on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and this would in some ways be very appropriate (apart from the fact that it is a much gentler climb). It is was from Bethany on the other side of the Mount of Olives that Jesus began his triumphal entry into the holy city on what we call Palm Sunday. It was in the garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the hill that he was arrested and subsequently led to his Crucifixion. It was to the Mount of Olives that Jesus took his disciples after the Resurrection (in Luke's Gospel, that is: Matthew has Galilee, which does suggest Tabor), and here Jesus was finally taken from them as he ascended to heaven. The same place is closely associated, therefore, with what is known as the Paschal Mystery, the passing over of Jesus to the Father through his Crucifixion, death on the cross and rising again to the new life, returning to God his work on earth complete: it is what we celebrate in Holy Week and Easter, the heart of the Church's year.

We can see the Transfiguration as a prevision of the glory of the risen Lord which the disciples came to know, and in which we believe all of us will share. Although they scarcely knew what to make of it, such an arresting happening must have stayed with them and perhaps gave them hope and faith to endure the dark days that lay ahead, as they saw their beloved Lord so shamefully treated and terribly done to death. Although the vision was brief and quickly removed from them, it was enough. Coming as it does on the second Sunday of Lent the Transfiguration may likewise help us to keep our goal in view as we journey towards Easter.

Last year we were well into Lent when the effects of the pandemic first struck and lockdown was imposed. A year further on we are all too familiar with the reduced state of our lives that we have had to endure - doing without things has become a way of life - but we are thankfully beginning to see the end and have the hope of a return to normality. Spring is returning in the natural world, things are coming back to life, our spirits are lifting.

The old English word from which we get Lent does in fact mean the springtime, but I think we still have a rather negative view of Lent as a time of privation, of giving things up. So when St. Benedict in his Rule says that 'there can be no doubt that monastic life should always have a Lenten character about it,' that does not immediately sound appealing. He explains, however, that the purpose of giving things up, 'food or drink or sleep, excessive talking and loose behaviour,' too

much TV or chocolate we might add, is 'to increase the joy of spiritual longing with which we should look forward to the holy time of Easter.'

This is the sense, I think, in which all our lives, like those of the monks, can have a continual Lenten character – that we are always preparing to enter into the glory of resurrection life, which is our human destiny. The origins of Lent lie in the period of preparation that people would go through in order to be baptised and received into the Church at Easter: commemorating the forty days of deprivation in the wilderness was a later addition, and in recent times the Church has begun to recapture the sense of Lent as preparation for Easter. There would be fasting, which sharpens the senses – increases the joy of spiritual longing, and prayer as part of it, but always with that end in view.

It is good, therefore, that having begun the season we step back a little on the second Sunday to recall the Transfiguration. The vision of Christ in glory on the hillside is our goal, our aim, the destination towards which we are moving in our journey through life. Especially at a time like the present it can give us hope that God is leading us ever closer to himself, as members of the body of his glorified risen Son.

Wishing you a happy week,

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