

Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord

6 August 2017

Fr Joshua Nelson

Luke 9:28-36

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration. We have attempted to change the experience of worship on this day. As you entered through baptism at the font, you were greeted by an image, an Icon of this gospel event. Jesus is presented as the Ancient of Days, resplendent in dazzling white, surrounded by a mandorla of tabor light, with beams radiating from his presence. He is flanked on either side by Moses and Elijah, the living representations of the Law and the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets which are themselves fulfilled and summed up in the living Word of God, in Jesus himself. Our vestiture and the adornments of the sanctuary are white, reflecting the light of heaven. The candles flicker, illuminating our world. The incense billows as the cloud which descended on the mountain, and from which the voice of an instructive God could be heard like thunder. We have attempted to excite the senses, to raise the level of our worship experience. But it is only a meager attempt to take us to the level of experience felt by these three apostles, all taken aback on the grassy summit of Mt Tabor.

Throughout our history as a Church, words and music have been used as a means by which we express the inexpressible experience of our souls. In her book *Glimpses of Grace*, Madeleine L'Engle, famed author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, attempts to express this experience through poetry. I'd like to read for you her take on Transfiguration.

*Suddenly they saw him the way he was,
the way he really was all the time,
although they had never seen it before,
the glory which blinds the everyday eye
and so becomes invisible. This is how
He was, radiant, brilliant, carrying joy
like a flaming sun in his hands.
This is the way he was – is – from the beginning,
and we cannot bear it. So he manned himself,
came manifest to us; and there on the mountain
they saw him, really saw him, saw his light.
We all know that if we really see him we die.
But isn't that what is required of us
Then, perhaps, we will see each other, too.*

But how do we connect with the Transfiguration? How do we experience the beauty, the horror, and the magnificent warmth of the presence of God?

Though it were difficult for some people to believe, I am an introvert. I recharge by being alone, by being still, by being quiet. I will go on a hike, or walk through the botanical gardens, or kayak out on a lake or river. Sometimes in my recovery time I am blessed with a glimpse of grace, a peek into the heavens. These are what Celtic Christianity calls the "Thin Spaces." Time and place where the veil between the temporal and the spiritual fades away. A time and a place where my hand slips behind the curtain and I feel the warmth of heaven. Sometimes it happens in the middle of a crowd, upon hearing the laugh of a child, while singing a hymn in Mass, or while praying the concerns of our community. For a few seconds, I am taken beyond myself. These are little moments where I find a sense of peace, where a sweet fragrance fills my nostrils and I learn something new about God, and the loving relationship he extends towards us.

Sometimes the space is thinned to give us a revelation about our world. In 1958, the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton was walking in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. While standing at the corner

of Fourth and Walnut, Merton himself entered a thin space and saw the light of transfiguration. As he looked around the busy square, he saw every one who passed him engulfed in a radiant light, what some might call an aura. In his own words of the experience he said, "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers." That brief moment of experience in the thin space caused Merton to reevaluate his vocation. Although he remained a monastic for the rest of his life he turned his focus to issues of social justice and sharing with the world the epiphany that all peoples are connected. He went on to write of the Louisville Revelation, "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness . . . I have the immense joy of being [hu]man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me,

now I realized what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

In Madelein's words, we have seen Christ, as He is. Every week we are given a small glimpse of grace, a peek at the flickering light, through the celebration of the Eucharist. The breaking and sharing of the bread and wine is a moment where time stops, a moment where we are connected with Angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven; with those who have come before us, and those who are yet to come. Because of this, we must daily live as an image of Christ transfigured. We must become a living icon, full of joy in the light of the love of God radiating out into the midst of a dark and lonely world. Walking around, shining like the sun.

Through those moments in the "thin spaces" the experience fills us with life and vigor and we often walk away with the feeling that we could do anything. This is a feeling I often get after working Diocesan Camp, or being part of some other similar gathering. But we quickly learn that life is not always full of light. It is not always easy and we sometimes see only darkness. This is when we seek God, and thank him for the little moments.

We also leave the light, and become complacent in our experience. We leave the light and sit in the shade, a shade that can easily become the shadow of our own selfishness. We pass the homeless person on the street, and do everything in our power to convince ourselves that it's someone else's problem. Or we suppress the empathy welling up within us. For the friend who seems to be having a rough time right now. So we don't say anything, and hurry home. But when we truly see Christ AS HE IS, we have to die, we have to die to ourselves and allow the light of the transfigured Christ to drive away the shadows we chose to live with. It is not easy, but since we have seen Him, we can not help but to be changed.

Former Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote a book a few years back called *The Dwelling of the Light*. It is a series of reflections brought about by praying with Icons of Christ. The first reflection is on this Icon of the Transfiguration. There is a juxtaposition in the icon, showing the dance between shadow and light. This is what Williams calls, "A huge hope, but also a huge dose of unwelcome reality: to be brought into such relation with Jesus that we live in his glory ought surely mean that we are kept safe. But faith in Jesus appears to mean that we have to live in the world with all its risks, our lives open to the depths from which Jesus lives."

This is why Madelein ends her poem the way she does: *We all know that if we really see him we die. But isn't that what is required of us? Then, perhaps, we will see each other, too.*

We have seen Him, and if we open our eyes to His light we will see Him daily in the world around us. The SELF is blinded by the light, so we die to ourselves daily. We now live as reflections of the light. We must learn to thank God for the little moments, for the thin spaces. But then we must continue in the world, and walk with God through the fields. These are the fields of our homes, our workplaces, our community, and share the light of the Christ we know. This is why we pray at the end of the Eucharist . . . "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do. . . " You have seen Him as he is, now go, and see each other too!

