

Transfiguration of the Lord (A)
(2 Peter 1:16-19 / Matthew 17:1-9)
06.08.2020

On this day when we are invited to look to the Transfigured Christ, we remember that we are called to resemble the One we contemplate. We are called not only to be *like Christ – Christlike*, as we say – but each one of us is called to be an *alter Christus, another Christ*. This is what being a Christian really entails.

To be *another Christ* requires of us to allow the Lord Jesus to live within us. When we do this – when we allow Christ to live within us – then He can and will shine through us. Enlightened by Christ's own wonderful light, a reflection of His loving face will become apparent on our visage. Looking at us people will see Jesus to be alive in us.

In a short meditation upon the significance of the Transfiguration for the life of the Christian in a reflection dedicated to the Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary, the late Fr Kevin Scallon, CM, had this to say: *The Transfiguration is truly a mystery of light. The glory of Jesus, the Son of God, shines forth; the light of the godhead is seen on the face of Christ while the Father proclaims to the astounded apostles: This is my Son, the Chosen One, listen to Him.*

Fr Kevin went on to pray: *Lord, we have never seen You transfigured like this, but we have seen the transforming radiance of Your presence on the faces of others... On the young mother with her afflicted child; on the young man arriving home from work; on the old priest as he offers the bread and wine; on the young nun as she moves lovingly among the starving poor.* I'm inclined to think of so many other scenarios where the presence of the Transfigured Christ is also to be witnessed. I'm sure, like me, many of you can think of places where you have seen Jesus to be alive and active, shining through the ministries and gentle testimonies of lives lived in the warm glow and resplendent brightness of His own glorious light.

Fr Kevin marvelled at the mystery of the Transfiguration, declaring: *Jesus, those who listen to you are always transformed by Your word. Even in suffering, You show us the joy of the Resurrection and a life transformed by the presence of the Holy Spirit.*

When we consider the glimpses we are given into the Transfigured Christ at work in the lives of our brothers and sisters – and in our own lives too – we can all marvel likewise. Our amazement is great and our joy profound as we declare our belief that not only God walked upon this earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but is alive and active in our midst in all those who carry Christ within them, allowing His life to shine out through theirs. Christ is alive! Christ is in our midst! He lives with us! He is present to us through others! He is present to others through us!

Having said what I have just proclaimed to be our faith, I cannot help but think of the very *raison d'être* of the Transfiguration experience into which the disciples were introduced as they made their way to Jerusalem. The extraordinary experience that was afforded to Peter, James and John – the blessing of sharing in such a graced moment along the way – was to prepare them for the horrors that lay ahead for the Master, and for themselves with Him. I am thinking of the pain of humiliation that awaited them. The disciples were given to contemplate the beauty of the Transfigured face of Jesus to prepare them for the ugly disfigurement they would later witness when Jesus would be subjected to His passion and the terrible end of life He would endure with His horrendous crucifixion.

The Transfigured Christ would soon become the Disfigured Christ.

If we are called to see signs of the Transfigured Christ upon the visage of those who reflect His light to us, we are also called to see signs of the Disfigured Christ in those who are maltreated and subjected to abuse in our world; those who are wrapped in sorrow or ensnared by distress.

We are meant to see Jesus in every person we encounter – not only those people of extraordinary charm and beauty, not only those whose brilliance is visible and who are radiant with God’s own light, but also in those who are badly battered, bruised and disfigured; the suffering, those emaciated by hunger, the distressed, the downcast, the down and out, those lying in the gutter, having hit rock bottom, those mutilated by acts of violence, the hundreds of thousands dead as a result of war..

Jesus lives not only on the heights, but also in the depths. He awaits to be discovered not only in joy and exaltation, but also in sadness and humiliation.

While it is surely right to think of the Transfiguration as a *Luminous Mystery*, it would be foolish of us to think of it only in terms of a mystery of light.

Maggie Ross has written lines which help us balance our appreciation of the feast we celebrate today. I quote from her work *‘The Fountain and the Furnace’*: *Too often we think of the Transfiguration as the feast of light only, one that dazzles like the sun reflected off the mothering sea. Too often we seek to fix our feet in the light alone, unrealistically or pridefully thinking that our transformation has reached a point where we will not be burned by uncreated light...* She goes on: *The story of the Transfiguration is surrounded by darkness: it is no mere ecstatic vision. It is surrounded by losing one’s life to gain it, by denial of prophets, by being tossed between fire and water by the fits of our sins, writhing under the light of God, and, in the end, by the glory of crucifixion.* She concludes: *Mere ecstatic vision is vain and ephemeral, and if like Peter we wish to fix our feet in that light, we will perish.* Maggie Ross’ words pull us back to earth with a bump if and when we are tempted to bathe everything in sweetness and light and thinking only in terms of ascending into the light, even as we journey through the vicissitudes of life in this world.

Without denying the glory the disciples witnessed on the mountaintop when Christ was transfigured in their sight, their descent from the height, where they had been given a glimpse into God’s own wonderful light, brought them back down to the plain, to the ordinary run of life, the shadowland of this earth. When they took to the road to Galilee again, the contrast with the splendid light enjoyed on the mountaintop must have left them feeling as if they had been plunged back into a dark place.

We must grasp that life is never all sweetness and light. There are clouds and there are shadows, as well as sunshine and brightness. The darkness around us and the darkness within us cannot – certainly should not – be denied. When we pretend it does not exist, we do so to our peril.

While it is vital for us to search out moments of light, high encounters with the Lord, times and places wherein we give Him our full attention and can listen to His voice – allowing ourselves to be illuminated by His word (a grace the psalmist has us ask for in prayer again and again); while it is important for us to allow our own countenance to be lit up by our contemplation of the bright face of Jesus Christ, whose light we are called to reflect... it is also important that we dare to walk through the dark valleys that are part of every person’s life journey, daring to believe that the Lord is with us as much in the shadowland as He is in the light. The psalmist assures us: *Darkness is not dark with you and the night is as bright as day.*

On this seventy-fifth anniversary of Hiroshima we cannot but think of the bomb dropped that day: a weapon of such horrible destruction which robbed so many people of their lives and which has scarred our world ever since.

The bomb that descended upon Hiroshima was called *Little Boy*. Hearing that name given to a weapon of mass destruction, I cannot but think of the irony of it. I think of those prophetic texts which speak of *a little boy leading God's people to peace and prosperity*. The *little boy* of whom Isaiah prophesied – whom we see to be the Christ child – had for mission to lead people in a way that shows opposing forces being reconciled, causes of suffering and pain being removed and reasons for sorrow being replaced with reasons for great rejoicing.

The *Little Boy* we are called to remember today – the One who matured and became the man *Jesus of Nazareth*, in whom was made manifest *the Christ* – we believe to be God's instrument of peace. He must be seen and celebrated as the antidote to that bomb ironically code-named *little boy* which was used as a weapon seventy-five years ago today. We need the Christ child's eternal message of peace more than ever. We are called to proclaim anew this morning what St Paul first announced: *Christ Himself is our peace*. It is urgent that we reiterate this message in our own day and age. Just think of the horrors of the past days in Beirut!

We cannot but be aware of the threat of nuclear warfare which hinders the progress of human life at this moment in time and in so many ways. This threat paralyses us with the fear that such devastation as was meted out upon the earth seventy-five years ago today might be unleashed anew in our own lifetime. Even if atomic bombs are not detonated their very existence risks destroying us. Right now their acquisition and their constant upgrading cripples our world economy. Just think of all the costs involved in financing *the arms race*. Just think of all the money that is not being devoted to the promotion of life and well-being at a time when financial resources are so badly needed in the domain of medical research to help us fight the present pandemic. While nations continue to build up arsenals of nuclear weaponry, to be held in store as deterrents, medical research is left greatly under-financed. This is nothing short of a disgrace. It is so terribly futile.

From Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the only two cities in the world to be destroyed atomic bombs, Pope Francis made an impassioned appeal for the total elimination of nuclear arms. It is good for us to listen to what he said on this seventy-fifth anniversary of Hiroshima. I quote: *The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possession of atomic weapons is immoral*. He went on: *We will be judged on this*. Speaking at a meeting for peace at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan last year the pope said: *The possession of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is not the answer to humanity's desire for security, peace and stability*. He pointed out that *our world is marked by a perverse dichotomy that tries to defend and ensure stability and peace through a false sense of security sustained by the mentality of fear and mistrust, one that ends up poisoning relationships between peoples and obstructing any form of dialogue*. He went on to forcefully denounce the arms race saying: *in a world where millions of children and families live in inhumane conditions, the money that is squandered and the fortunes made through the manufacture, upgrading, maintenance and sale of ever more destructive weapons, are an affront crying out to heaven*.

The way to true peace is through dialogue. That means taking to heart a word heard at the core of today's Gospel passage: *Listen*. We must speak with each other, listen to each other. We must come to see each other bathed in God's own glorious light. The call addressed to us

is to see a reflection of Christ in every living person; to see each and every one – and ourselves to begin with – as made in the image and likeness of God.

At the Transfiguration, the voice from heaven said: *This is my Beloved Son, listen to Him.* That same voice says to us today that we are God's beloved children. It reminds us that all those around us are also to be seen and honoured as such. It bids us to see ourselves and others as God's children. The Beatitude which we heard many associate these days with our own great statesman John Hume is *Blessed are the peacemakers.* Note what the text goes on to say: *For they will be called children of God.* It is good for us to be reminded on this Feast of the Transfiguration that we are all bidden to be *peacemakers... children of God.*

If we are to arrive at the peace we are called to build together we must do as the disciples were bidden to do when they saw the splendid vision they beheld on the mountaintop. We must listen. We must listen to the Lord who speaks a message of peace. *I will hear what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace.* We must listen to each other in a spirit of genuine dialogue which respects and cherishes each one's point of view and rejoices in the differences between us which can be blended in such a way as to create a wonderful harmony, reflective of that of the beauty of creation we behold all around us.

Amen!