

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

St. Luke 9:28-36

It may seem odd that in Lent the Church proclaims the Gospel of the Transfiguration of our Lord. Lent is usually associated with Christ in the wilderness and our penance and preparation for the glory that comes with Easter, not with any glory in Lent. However, the glory of our Lord is not something separate from His suffering forty days and nights in the desert, nor from His passion and crucifixion. The glory of Christ is the consequence of His suffering, for there would be no glory without the resurrection and there would be no resurrection without the crucifixion.

On that mountain-top of Tabor two thousand years ago, with the apostles Peter, James and John, our Lord was transfigured and “the aspect of His face changed and His clothes became brilliant as lightning.” All the dust and dirt of the trek up the mountain, all the tiredness, all the hunger pangs and thirst were transfigured and our Lord stood before them with all the brightness and beauty of the glory that would not be seen again until His rising from the dead.

Think about the context of this event. St. Luke writes that it happened “eight days after,” meaning it happened on the first day of a new week—the first day of a new time. It happened on a mountain top—traditionally thought to be Mount Tabor near the Sea of Galilee south of Lebanon—and it is on a mountain top that Moses received the Ten Commandments, and in a mountain crevice that Elijah is shielded from the glory of God. And it is here, again, on a mountain top that Moses and Elijah appear with Christ; Moses, who personifies the Law, and Elijah, who personifies the Prophets, stand with Christ in whom the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets is found. Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, had announced that the Christ must suffer. Christ is the fulfillment of all that has ever been, all that is now, and all that will ever be.

That is why, in the end, with Moses and Elijah gone, He stands alone. But for a moment God revealed in Himself and God revealed to man stands on that mountain. For with Moses and Elijah, the revelation of God to man in the Old Testament, there is God revealed in Himself in the Holy Trinity; God the Father in the voice from Heaven, God the Son in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in the cloud that overshadows them. Together in the three persons of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, God stands on the mountain top.

The three apostles that were with Christ—Peter, James, and John—are the same three that will be with Him in the garden of Gethsemane, and there too they will be tired. Here on the mountain they were tired but managed to keep awake. In the garden they, again, will be tired, but will fall asleep. St. Luke says, “they were heavy with sleep, but they kept awake and saw His glory.” In other words, if they had fallen asleep they would have missed the whole thing—the transfiguration would have passed them by. But because they stayed awake, a phrase so often used by Christ, they saw His glory. In the garden of Gethsemane as Christ suffered and sweated blood they slept and so did not see His suffering.

So often our own suffering and our own joys are separate from one another and it is difficult to see how suffering can be thought of with joy. Peter, James and John could not see it, but Moses and Elijah did. For St. Luke says, “they were speaking of His passing which He was to accomplish in Jerusalem.” In other words, in the midst of this glorious revelation of God Moses and Elijah saw that it would be accomplished fully only when He had returned from the mountain top to Jerusalem to face His death. Peter, James and John, however, wanted to hold on to that glory forever and so they said tents or tabernacles should be built for Moses, Elijah and Our Lord. The Cross that Christ would bear in Jerusalem, the way of sorrows that He would walk, was the way He would walk to reach His glory. The Cross is not the final outcome, but it is the Cross that gives birth to the Resurrection.

The Transfiguration was shown to Peter, James and John, and is told to us, because we all need to believe that our life has meaning, and that there is purpose in suffering, and that it is not an end in itself but a means to an end. We all want to feel that our experiences matter and make sense. St. Thomas Aquinas said: "For a person to go straight along the road, he must have some knowledge of the end... This is particularly necessary if the road is hard and rough, the going heavy, [but] the end... delightful."