

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD

St. Matthew 17:1-9

There is an essential aspect to the Transfiguration which we must understand, especially in today's society. On that mountain top, two figures appear with Christ: Moses and Elijah. Moses, who represents the Law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets. These two Old Testament figures appear by the side of Our Lord, whose incarnation marks the beginning of the New Testament. But Our Lord does not represent a break from the old to the new. He is the fulfillment of it all. In Christ, the Law and the prophets find their fulfillment. Our Lord Himself said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (*Mt. 5:17*). That is why, in the end, it is Christ alone on the mountaintop.

Today many, including those who profess to be Catholic, have lost the sense of the centrality of Christ. Instead, they hold Him to be a role model or a figure head or an example to follow. But He is more than that. He is the fulfillment of all that has come before. In the letter to the Colossians, St. Paul wrote: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He Himself is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to have first place in everything. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him God was pleased to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of His cross" (*Col. 1:15-20*).

On that mountaintop of Tabor two thousand years ago, Our Lord showed Himself to be the fulfillment of all faith and hope of generations past. Today, many have abandoned Our Lord and that fulfillment and instead hold to a kind of self-salvation, as though they find fulfillment in themselves and as though they can save themselves. Instead of seeking reconciliation with God, many seek reconciliation with the world. This, however, is nothing new. In the early fifth century a man named Pelagius spread the false doctrine that we can save ourselves. That was condemned by the Church as a heresy called Pelagianism. Today there is, tragically, a resurgence of this idea.

Whilst many believe that God is loving and merciful and that we have free will and that there is some sort of life after death, they fight the idea that God is also our judge and that it is God, not man, that determines what is true spirituality. They also reject the teachings and the rituals of the Church claiming that they are out of touch with the modern world. The idea of sacrifice and suffering is ridiculed because, they say, we are entitled to an easy life. And this, then, gives rise to the ideas that pervade our society today; that I can choose who I am, or what I am, and that God does not expect me to have to follow the moral precepts of the Church if it is too difficult for me or if it makes me unhappy, because God just wants me to be happy. No, God wants me to be holy, and holiness brings me into communion with God in whom true joy and the fulfillment of who I am is found.

We all want to feel contented and at peace with ourselves. It isn't pleasant or easy to accept sacrifice and suffering, let alone to see in these things a means of salvation in uniting ourselves with the sufferings of Christ. Even St. James and St. John, who were on that mountaintop with Our Lord, wanted to remain there. They said, "it is wonderful for us to be here" (*Mt. 17:4*), but, in the very next verse, as the voice of God the Father spoke and said: "This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him" (*Mt. 17:5*), it says: "When they heard this, the disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear" (*Mt. 17:6*).

The demand to listen to Christ and to do as He commands was too much for them and they were afraid. Many of us can understand that fear. There are moments where we feel contented and there is a serenity or peace that we feel when things are going well. But then the demands of our faith, of taking up our Cross and following Our Lord, overwhelm us and we are afraid of what it demands of us.

No one in their right mind enjoys suffering and no one should actively seek it out. But it is a consequence of following Our Lord and it is then that we have to make a choice to sacrifice or not. Many choose not to, and it is understandable. But we cannot then justify our actions or seek some alternative version of Christianity that makes us feel better. Children don't especially like to eat their vegetables, but parents know that they must because it is good for them. Children don't especially want to go to school, but parents know that education is important to help them to grow as human beings. Children don't especially like being told no, but parents know that there are times when the right thing for the child is to tell them no. If a parent were to allow his or her child to choose whether or not to eat their vegetables, or whether or not to go to school, or to never tell their child no, then there is no love for that child. Love is not giving someone whatever they want, whenever they want, however they want. Love is seeking the best for someone, even when it hurts.

This is our Catholic faith. This is the faith given to us by God Himself. This is the faith that pits us against the world and demands that we make a stand for Christ. This is a faith that says: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me... For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" (*Mt.* 16:24, 26). This is a faith that means we have to come down from the mountaintop and keep on going, all the way to Calvary.