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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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TRANSFIGURATION

Lent is something of a roller coaster for many of us. It begins with the peak experience of Ash Wednesday and the season's first Sunday gospel of Christ in the desert, and it ends with another high point, Holy Week and the great services of the Triduum, and in between we go through a bit of a valley. Our attention flags, our Lenten resolutions go by the board, and we seem to be becalmed. And so perhaps the gospel for Lent's second Sunday, which is always the account of the Transfiguration of Christ on the mountain, finds us a bit unprepared and unfocused, much as the actual event seems to have found Peter, James and John, who were with Jesus when he underwent his transformation and who were utterly bewildered by what they saw. Coming down the mountain, they were able to speak with Jesus about what had happened, and this seems to have helped them some. Maybe our spending some extra time with this gospel will be of help to us. Since this year Mark's account of the Transfiguration (9:2-10) is the one read, we will use that, although at one key moment we will have to consult the gospel of Luke.

In Mark the Transfiguration is clearly presented as something of great importance. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "The event of the Transfiguration marks *a decisive moment in the ministry of Jesus*. It is a revelatory event which strengthens the faith in the disciples' hearts, prepares them for the tragedy of the cross and prefigures the glory of the resurrection." It is thus very much a moment of anticipation, one that looks ahead to both Calvary and the empty tomb, and yet if we are to appreciate its full power, we must begin by looking backward, to what happened immediately before the revelation on the mountain. Here, context is everything, as we can see from the way Mark begins his account. The words "after six days" (9:2) link the Transfiguration to the preceding verses, and insist that we see it as a continuation of what has just happened.

In Mark 8:27-9:1 Jesus had asked his disciples two questions about his own identity: Who do the people say I am? and Who do you say I am? Peter spoke for them all and said, "You are the Christ." Jesus then gave them the first prediction of his passion, telling them that the Son of Man would be rejected by the elders and chief priests, and that he would be killed, and that only after that would he be raised on the third day. Peter had just identified Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and whatever Peter had meant by that title, he clearly did not mean for it to include anything about a humiliating death, and so he protests and corrects Jesus. Jesus turns on him, calls him a Satan, and accuses him of being on man's side rather than God's. Jesus then goes on to insist that his coming death is not just his, but is also theirs. If they want to be his disciples, they will have to take up their own cross and follow him, for whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for the sake of Jesus and for the gospel will save it. And he ends with a word of prophecy: "Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." Mark's next words

are “After six days,” and with these he launches his account of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain.

What happens on the mountain, therefore, is at base the fulfillment of the prophecy Jesus had made a week earlier. Indeed, among the group of disciples gathered about him, “there are some standing here” who would “see that the kingdom of God has come with power” before they died, namely Peter, James and John, who were led by Jesus up the mountain to be the witnesses of his Transfiguration. Whatever else can be said about the Transfiguration – and there is a great deal more that can and must be said about it – it is most certainly a revelation of the presence of the kingdom of God, a kingdom more real and more powerful than all the earthly kingdoms that color our maps of the world.

This revelation of the kingdom of God is at once a revelation of and about Jesus. The words that



come from heaven are words about Jesus, and they are words that the disciples have heard before, for in large measure they repeat what the voice from above had said at the Jordan River at the moment of Jesus’ baptism by John. As soon as Jesus had emerged from the water, Mark tells us, he saw the heavens open and the Spirit descend on him like a dove, and he heard a voice say, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” The scene on the mountain is quite similar, even if there are significant differences. A cloud overshadows them, and the voice speaks to the three disciples, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

Both events are epiphanies, revelations of the Triune God in and through the identification of Jesus as the beloved Son of God. At the Jordan, we hear the Father’s voice as the Son is anointed with the Holy Spirit, descending upon him as a dove. On the mountain the Son is

overshadowed by the cloud, a sign of the luminous presence of the Spirit, and once again the Father’s voice reveals Jesus as God’s beloved Son.

And yet what happened on the mountain is not just a repetition of what happened at the river. There are differences. On the mountain Jesus is seen in all his glory, a glory not seen at the river, a glory testified to by the Law and the Prophets, by the whole history and heritage of Israel as embodied in Moses and Elijah, who appear with Jesus on the mountain and who converse with him. And the words are different. At the river they were spoken to Jesus, almost as if they were a private conversation between the Father and the Son that we were privileged to overhear. On the mountain they are spoken to the disciples, and they contain a command that was not heard earlier – “Listen to him.” Since we do not normally order people to listen up when they are already doing so, the implication here is that the disciples have not been listening, that they have failed to hear and mark Jesus’ words to them. Since the command is given immediately after Peter had made his suggestion that the disciples put up three tents so that they could all make the mountain, this moment, their permanent dwelling place, we must assume that it is these words which betray the closed ears of the disciples.

Since Peter is the speaker, and since Peter had been rebuked by Jesus himself for what he had said six days earlier, it is clear that he has not progressed much, that he is still pretty much where he was a week before. Then, Peter had refused to accept Jesus’ words about the cross. Peter’s notion of Christ had no room for the suffering of God’s anointed one, so he rejected Jesus’ words about his passion and insisted that he (Jesus) withdraw them. On the mountain, surrounded by the glory of God shining on the face of Christ, Peter once again refuses to hear Jesus’ words. Mark does not tell us what Jesus and

Moses and Elijah were talking about, but we could make a guess if we had to, and conclude that they were talking about the same thing that Jesus had been talking about the week before, namely his humiliation and death. We do not, however, have to guess at this, for Luke tells us that they “spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem” (9:31). The English word *departure* translates the Greek word *exodus*, whose most basic meaning is indeed a departure, a leave-taking, an exit. But *exodus* in the Old Testament, of course, is always the salvation and liberation of the people from their slavery in Egypt, the original Passover of the Lord that set them free and made them God’s people. That word, plus the reference to what must happen in Jerusalem, is a clear reference to the saving death of Jesus on the cross.

Once again, Peter does not want to hear about this. He loves the glory and relishes the sweetness of the moment on the mountain; this is where he wants to make his home. What Peter wants is the glory of the mountain without the way of the cross. He and the others are not listening to Jesus, who always insists that the cross is the only way into the glory of God, first for him, even though he is the beloved Son of God, and then for them, who belong to him by faith and are his disciples. If Peter, who stands for all of us as followers of Jesus, does not hear the whole word of Christ, a word that contains the fullness of suffering and the fullness of glory, then he does not hear the gospel and he loses everything. Thus, Mark 8:27-9:8 is truly the hinge of the gospel. It identifies Jesus as Christ by Peter’s profession of faith; it presents the doctrine of the cross; it reveals the glory of Jesus, which is the glory of the resurrection. The Transfiguration is the climax of it all, even as the resurrection is the climax of the passion and death of the Lord.

There is a long mystical tradition that interprets the Transfiguration as a moment of contemplation and as the very exemplar of all contemplation. The disciples see what they see on the mountain not as disinterested bystanders or indifferent witnesses. They are swept off their feet and hurled into the heart of the moment, so much so that they are taken out of themselves, bewildered, and exceedingly afraid. Words fail them and they do not know what to say. Their gaze is the level, unblinking gaze of love. The love of God is revealed to them in their Lord and master, transfigured before their eyes, and as deep calls unto deep, from the depths of their hearts they surrender themselves completely in love.

As the model of all contemplation, the Transfiguration teaches us that contemplation, the supreme height of the spiritual life, is nothing so shallow as a mere thinking about God, a mental reflection on his works and his being, an attempt to wrap the mind around him and wrestle him down to our level of understanding. On the mountain, Peter’s mind has done the best it can do, and the voice tells him to stop, to be quiet and to listen. In these regions the restlessness of our hearts and the curiosity of our intellects come to the end of their road. They have done all they can do, they have gone as far as they can go, and nothing is left them save to wait for the coming of the Lord in suffering and in glory. The Transfiguration is an anticipation of the resurrection. Not the final thing, it nevertheless points to it and communicates it to the soul that waits in faith and in hope and, above all, in love.

This mystical tradition knows contemplation to be the look of love, and with this look all distance, all separation, between the beholder and the one beheld is annihilated. To behold with this love is to draw close to and to become one with the beloved. It is a being taken out of oneself that resembles nothing so much as dying, and so it is inseparable from the cross, much as we, like Peter, might wish it otherwise. To love in this way is to be so taken into the object of love that one becomes what he loves. If the object is God, the God who creates, redeems and sustains us in this love, then the soul is filled to bursting with him, rammed with life and fully alive as it can be only in God. The fullness of this awaits the glory of the end time, but even on this side of the grave there are transfiguration moments when the prayer of union, the prayer of silence, is poured into our hearts.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.