

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, 11 February 2018 (Year B)
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

O God, who before the passion of thy only-begotten Son didst reveal his glory upon the holy mount: Grant unto us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

1 Kings 19:9-18

2 Peter 1:16-19

Mark 9:2-19

In the epistle attributed in the canon to Peter that we heard earlier, the author writes, “for we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” That the transfiguration happened, that Peter and James and John accompanied Jesus up the mountain and saw him in all the glory of the resurrection was essential for the early church to believe. This was not some story from the distant past, back in the age of the Homeric mythic heroes, for example, but rather an event that happened just a few years ago, to real people, like you and me. The experience the disciples had of the risen Christ during that first Eastertide must have matched that of the transfiguration—that he was the same but changed, more—and showed that God enters into our daily lives in unexpected places and at unexpected moments and transforms us.

We are not affected by the events of Jason and the Argonauts, or tales of the Twelve Labours of Hercules, or even the delightful stories of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Even if these stories are meant to be cautionary or instructive, they are not meant to

have happened to people we knew, people in our lifetime, people like us. But we are meant to understand the Transfiguration, as extraordinary as it is, as the kind of momentary meeting of the immanent and the transcendent that we, too, might experience. And in and through that moment we come to know who Jesus truly is and what we are called to do.

The Transfiguration is recorded in three of the Gospels: Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The account we have here in Mark is the earliest of the three versions and serves as the basis for the other two. In Mark's Gospel the Transfiguration is closely connected to Jesus' remarks concerning his passion that was to take place at Jerusalem and that would be the culmination of his mission and ministry. Indeed, one of the main themes of Mark's gospel that I have been discussing these past few weeks is that of Jesus' identity. Jesus was the messiah, the son of Man, who "would suffer many things, and be rejected by the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Over and over we see Jesus' followers refusing to grasp the full meaning of this new kind of messianic identity, while the powers of the cosmos, like the demons and spirits, know exactly who he is.

The episode in Mark that almost immediately precedes the Transfiguration is one such moment. Jesus just told the crowds and his disciples, quite "plainly" the text says, what would unfold and Peter (and we assume the others) flat out refused to believe it. So Jesus must have decided it was time to show them, to give them a preview, as it were, of things to come.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses.

Jesus became somehow changed, like himself, but different, and he shone with a radiance and brightness that must have been overwhelming. Peter and James and John must certainly have understood that something extraordinary was unfolding. It certainly made an impression on Peter, as he suggested building those booths to make themselves comfortable, to make the experience last as long as possible.

That was not to be. This was just a glimpse, and before he knew it, “a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him.’ And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.” This one last moment, however, gave those present another clue as to Jesus’ identity as the messiah who will suffer. Naming Jesus “my beloved son” marked him as God’s chosen, a prophet (but more than a prophet as this chosen one is a son) and those so marked suffer for the sake of God before they are finally redeemed.

Peter and James and John saw Jesus transfigured, saw him as more than himself, saw him in his full glory and heard him marked as God’s beloved, his chosen, his son. In that moment, God’s fullness became manifested into space and time, actualised, visible, present; then it was over. It was a foretaste, meant to give them hope and courage to continue the journey. This is what mountain top experiences are at the

core: moments, out of time, in which something extraordinary happens, giving us new insight. By their very nature, they have to end so that we can return to our daily lives and bring back what we have learnt, integrate it into our very being, apply its lessons, allow it to transform us so that we can transform others.

This foretaste of the resurrection, this momentary inbreaking of God's presence into this moment we see at the Transfiguration is the very heart of the sacramental life. Sacraments are those occasions when God breaks into the here and now and manifests divine love, allowing us to participate in its reality, allowing that experience to transform us. That is what happens every time we celebrate the Eucharist. The risen Christ, in his fulness, becomes specially present with us so that we may unite our bodies with his body. We become one with him and with each other, heading out into the world as the very Body of Christ, pursuing our vocations and ministry in the world as Christ's hands and feet. And every time we celebrate the Eucharist we learn a little better to recognise Eucharistic and other kinds of sacramental moments in our daily lives.

Baptism, like the Eucharist, is another such sacramental moment, and indeed today's gospel reminds us of Jesus' own baptism, as we hear God reiterate words from that moment, proclaiming him "my beloved son." In baptism God breaks into this moment and affirms our identity as children of God, assures us we are loved always and everywhere, and that we have a ministry before us to go forth as the Body of Christ and live the Great Commandment to love God in and through loving our

neighbours.

Today we welcome two new people into the household of Christ as baptised persons. Cassius and Eleanor today begin their journeys as our brothers and sisters in baptism. This moment is a true beginning, an opening as we are reminded by the post-baptismal prayer when I will ask God to “give them an inquiring and discerning hearts, the courage to will and to persevere, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God’s works.” In this moment, we too, are given a glimpse of Christ in all his Glory, in his fulness (as the Prayer Book calls it), most able to receive divine love, most able to give it. We see it in these children, receptive to love and loving, just as we saw Jesus transfigured, crucified, and risen. We see in this moment all the possibility of relationship with God in Christ actualised here and now in the gathered community, hopeful that we can go forth from this place, changed by what has transpired here, and do the ministry we have been given to do. When Jesus got down from the mountain, he got right back to work. He cured the boy possessed by the spirit and continued on his journey.

The Transfiguration we live today, the glimpse of the resurrection we recall in the Gospel story and that we live in the Baptism and Eucharist we celebrate, is a mountain top experience down from which we must come, back to life, back out onto the street and into our lives. It is a high point before we begin our Lenten journey on Wednesday, one that will lead to through Holy Week, to the foot of the cross, and once again to the vision of light and radiance we felt today. Let this bit of warmth give us

sustenance for what lies ahead.

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