

Feast of the Transfiguration

Dear Parishioners,

The Feast of the Transfiguration is one of those few feasts in the Church's calendar that, if they fall on a Sunday, they replace the liturgy prescribed for the Sundays of Ordinary Time. Every five years or so, depending on how leap years make the calendar jump, we have the opportunity of meditating on the mystery of the Transfiguration with a full Sunday congregation. In fact, in those particular years the coincidence of the Feast with the Lord's Day enables us to have two bites at the Transfiguration cherry. Every year on the Second Sunday in Lent the story of what happened to Jesus on the mountain (unnamed by the evangelists but assigned by tradition to Mount Tabor) is related in the gospel in the three versions which survive in the NT from the pens of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Its position in the Lenten calendar links the story very closely to the mounting narrative of the ascent to Jerusalem and to the Passion.

It is clear that this story which was kept a secret by Peter, James and John until after Jesus had risen from the dead, just as he asked them, made a deep impression on the first Christians and quickly took its place, a prominent one, in the tradition of the early Church. We know from the gospels that the disciples were very preoccupied about the fate of Jesus, they were aware - and John reports their anxieties and the plotting around Jesus repeatedly - that their master was running a particularly perilous gauntlet. He mentioned his forthcoming passion rather too often for comfort. The disciples were dispirited by all this gloomy talk and had a profound sense of foreboding. In taking Peter, James and John with him up the mountain, in having them as witnesses to this moment where the intensity of his prayer transformed him within and outwardly, in letting them catch a glimpse of the glory that awaited him after "he had risen from the dead" - an idea the three companions did not comprehend - he strengthened them and through them the other disciples for the arduous journey up to Jerusalem that was ahead. It was that momentary revelation of Jesus' glory as him who was destined to "sit at the Father's right hand" that makes the transfiguration a unique moment in the NT. On the mountain, heaven and earth met. The future reached back to the present.

There are moments in all human lives where happiness transforms us, where an experience we momentarily have provides a foretaste of the greater beatitude that awaits us. Our wedding day, the birth of our first child, the splendour of an Alpine landscape, the overarching glory of the night sky, the smile of a happy little boy or girl, the glint of love in the eyes of the person dear to us - we can work out our own list. It must be wonderful to have such an experience on our death bed. I like to think that such was the experience of Pope Paul VI on the Feast of the Transfiguration, 6 August 1978, the day he died.

Father Patrick