

Transfiguration Sunday

26.02.2017
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

The text for this week – Matthew’s story of the Transfiguration – has so much significance for the depiction of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of God, and even long departed prophets – one who rose to the sky in a chariot and another who descended a mountain with the law of God written on tablets of stone – are bearing witness to him. A voice from the sky speaks of identity, love and listening.

However, the approach taken for the reflection this week will take a different entry point into the passage and instead explore what it means to be tired, what it means to need a break, to need refreshment, and the place of retreat during demanding times. Even retreat can be an experience of conflict – both inner and outer – as we see in the desire of Peter to build tents and remain in this high place where deep truths are being unfolded. They, like anyone, descend the mountain, going from the place where their inner vision was replenished to the ground, to the place of encounter, interruption and questioning.

Text

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Comment

The text is sandwiched between harsh words of Jesus. Preceding the Transfiguration, Jesus had predicted his upcoming suffering and when Peter objected, Jesus says “Get behind me Satan”. And upon descending the mountain,

they rejoin the rest of the disciples who have been unable to help a man whose epileptic son keeps falling into fire. “You faithless and perverse generation” says Jesus.

While the sequence of this text is part of Matthew’s project to unfold the Christological truth of Jesus of Nazareth, it is also informative about human experience: life is tiring; demands are demanding; inadequacy is a powerful exhaustion; we are in need of times of nurture, of confirmation, where our sense of belonging can be deepened.

For the characters in these narratives, upon whose shoulders rest such responsibility, the demands of their vocation require times where their inner vision is nurtured: by climbing a mountain, by seeing a vista, by exercise, by time in a smaller group. And such nurture can also come from unexpected, even unexplainable or ungraspable moments of small apocalypse: an experience in prayer, words that so lift one out of circumstance as to give food for thought, and revitalized perspective for the everyday commitments.

The setting of this Transfigurative revelation is also informative. They have climbed a high mountain. It is reminiscent of the pilgrimages of Ascent to the temple, it is reminiscent also of Moses’ ascent of a mountain, of Abraham’s ascent with his son Isaac, and even of the ascent to a high place from earlier in Matthew’s text where the high place was a site of temptation.

It is worthwhile talking, too, of the incomprehensibility of this experience for the disciples. Peter, James and John have climbed a high mountain, and on the summit see Jesus, with his appearance transformed, in conversation with Elijah and Moses. Peter offers to make three dwellings, and while he’s still speaking, a bright cloud overshadows them.

The terse poetics of the wordchoice here are worthwhile noting. The cloud is bright, perhaps similarly to the transfigured face of Jesus. And yet this bright cloud overshadows them, and they hear words of love, power, belonging and instruction in this bright place of overshadowing. They see and do not see at the same time. Insight and obscurity occur simultaneously; as does fear, for the disciples are overcome with it. It is like an overwhelming experience of immersive art, a way in which an experience so enormous occurs that makes the everyday – even the intense everyday that preceeds this narrative – take on a different perspective.

This overwhelming event seems to have also provided a recalibration of power, perhaps especially for Peter. In an act of hospitality, but also perhaps a small act of control, he had offered to make three dwellings for the holy men of power: Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Instead, however, it is the three observers — Peter, James and John – who are overshadowed by a bright cloud of insight, instruction and fear.

It is, perhaps, an endorsement for all who are consumed in everyday intensity of work or obligations or demands, to find for themselves experiences that are so far beyond what is expected as to give one a different sense of being: poetry can do this (I think of the accessibility and inaccessibility of Emily Dickinson), as well as all great art, music, nature and science. To be put in one’s place, in this context, is a reminder of how it can be to be humble in this world. It helps them see, in their friend whose company they enjoy everyday, that which was always there, but perhaps unnoticed, unfamiliar and uncontrollable.

And like all overwhelming experiences, they then have to make their way down the mountain, back to the place of less light, less shadow too, less fear, and less revelation and try to make sense of the spiritual mountaintop in the valley of

human encounter. Neither experience is without its own dynamics of conflict, but the dynamics are vastly different in both.

Response

Questions for prayer, group discussion, or midrash:

- What is it that tires you?
 - Where do you see the need for this kind of disturbing and exhilarating retreat in the lives of yourself and others?
 - What is it that provides this experience of experience for you?
 - Rather than seeing this text as revealing what it means for Jesus to be divine, what does it reveal about Jesus being human? The consistency of what was wise within his own tradition — Moses and Elijah had each stood up to powers.
 - What are the purposes of pilgrimages of retreat in the time of conflict?
 - How can the journey “back down the mountain” be seen as something other than a defeat?
-

Prayer

God of the mountain and the prophet

God of the transfigured body and the tired body,

You are in the muscles of Jesus climbing the high hill.

And you are in the cloud. You are in the voice.

And you are in the companions, coming down that high mountain.

Help us to lift our eyes to the art that bewilders us

So that when we turn to what is around us

We may see the old with new eyes.

We ask this because you are in the bright cloud and in the high mountain

We ask this because you are also in the valley and in the interruption.

Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Reconciliation