

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Aug 6th 2014

Today's feast of the transfiguration of Jesus is one of those gospel events that steps out of the ordinary as does, for example, the account of the baptism of Jesus by John. Both involve the presence of the divine and the divinely inspired. I think of the transfiguration as something like "coming attractions."

The event takes place near the end of Jesus' public ministry and seems to act as a glimpse into the very near future -- Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus leads three of his disciples, Peter, James and John into this special scene and then astounding events unfolded before their eyes: "he was transfigured" before them; his "face shone like the sun;" and his garments became "white like the light." Peter responded by acknowledging "how good it is for us to be here." And then the cloud, the ancient sign of the very presence of God overshadowed them, and the voice, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him."

What on earth is going on here? From our historical perspective we can look back and say that the disciples were given a preview of the glory that belongs to Jesus after his death and resurrection and in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. They don't know it now, but that is the same glory that they will be given after they bring the message of the Kingdom to their contemporaries.

What a special moment for them, and also for us who receive the promise of ultimate glory from Jesus through God's generous love. We are invited to plumb the depths of this astonishing transfiguration moment in the lives of Jesus and the disciples.

I usually think of the "glory" of Jesus at the moment of the transfiguration being associated with his resurrection. But the truth is that BOTH the suffering/death of Jesus AND the resurrection represent to us the glory the Son has received from the Father.

Scripture scholar, Tom Wright invites his readers to discover a parallel between this transfiguration moment and the crucifixion of Jesus. It can be compared and contrasted schematically this way:

TRANSFIGURATION

CRUCIFIXION

Jesus revealed in GLORY

Jesus revealed in SHAME

His clothes SHINING WHITE

Clothes roughly STRIPPED OFF

Jesus with MOSES & ELIJAH

Jesus with TWO THIEVES

Surrounded by SHINING CLOUD

DARKNESS covers the land

The mount-top view of transfiguration gets its meaning from the hill-top of Golgotha and vice-versa. Our invitation is to acknowledge the glory in the crucifixion. Our lives are filled with experiences that we could describe as transfigurations: think of the birth of a child; honors coming from the hard work of getting an education; truly enjoying the benefits of good health. And our lives are filled with crucifixion experiences as well: the loss of a job or economic instability; the loss of a loved one to death; the pain of illness. The list can go on, and we are all called to be attentive to both types of experiences – those by which I am transfigured and those that are a crucifixion to me. The same glory shines through both of these real life situations if we but let it in, and in so doing we let Christ in at ever-deeper levels of our lives.

Lord, help me to live into the reality of Christ's life, death and resurrection in my own history. Let me be more deeply aware of Jesus' presence to me and to live into as well as out of that glorious inviting presence that you are to me.

Tom Shanahan, S.J.