

EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" – not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

REFLECTION 1:

THE CHOSEN ONE

If you have ever climbed Lugnaquilla, the highest mountain in County Wicklow known locally as 'The Lug', you will be aware that clouds are not unusual at the summit. The mist may descend at any moment and combined with clouds can impede visibility. There is also a strange comfort in the mist as if time had stood still, whispering 'stay here!'

Spiritual writers sometimes speak of a 'moment of grace'. It's a moment when the border between heaven and earth appears to fade for a brief time. God touches our lives deeply and we are blessed with a faint glimpse of eternity. Such a graced moment was experienced by Peter, James and John in today's Gospel. Just before Christmas I attended the nine scriptural readings and Carol singing in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin and I will never forget that brief moment when four trumpeters on the balcony joined the organ and choir in a crescendo of Christmas joy where everyone present experienced a graced moment that was almost tangible.

Today in our Gospel story about the Transfiguration (Luke 9: 28-36) Jesus invites Peter, James and John to pray with him on the mountain. The evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke (Synoptics) agree on the essentials of the narrative - the change in Jesus' appearance and his bright clothes are reminders of God's appearance to those on the mountain. The two Old Testament figures may represent the law and the prophets, Moses who received the tablets of the law on Mount Sinai and whose grave is unknown. Then according to Elisha, Elijah the prophet didn't die but was 'taken up' on a fiery chariot. It was as if Jesus went into consultation with these mighty figures of old, lawgiver and prophet and engaged with them concerning his 'exodus' which was to take place in Jerusalem, namely his oncoming passion, death and resurrection. Jesus' meeting with these mighty figures from the past must have taken quite a while as Peter offers to set up three tents, one for Moses and one each for Jesus and Elijah, treating all three equally - an intention countermanded by the divine view that thunders from the heavens identifying Jesus as the 'Chosen One' to whom they should listen, especially concerning this 'exodus' due to take place shortly. Luke points out that drowsiness impeded the disciples' awareness of the happening until it was almost too late. Only Luke gives us the detail that they were afraid when they heard the heavenly voice. Jesus directs the disciples not to tell anyone what have seen. That vital detail expresses the depth of their faith-experience. Now they wanted time to allow what they have seen and heard to settle in their minds and hearts so as to understand Jesus anew in the light of this mountain-top experience. Jesus' transfiguration brought them to a new stage of transformation letting it percolate within before they could talk about it to others. What they have in common with us is that element of mystery that God is always going to invite us beyond our current stage of growth. We pray that our faith may turn on the lights and illuminate the Christ in our lives, encouraging us to see in our brothers and sisters 'no one only Jesus', and so 'seeing the Lord's goodness in the land of the living' (Res. Ps 26).

REFLECTION 2:

CROSSING OVER

One of the most extraordinary experiences I had was when I was 9/10 years old. Around 3.00pm at Amiens Street Station, now Connolly Station, the train to Belfast, popularly known as the 'Beller' and later The Enterprise, would leave from Platform No 1. Ahead of 12 or more carriages was a mighty blue steam engine, named after a bird of prey – the Kestrel or the Merlin. The engine driver and the fireman after stoking the roaring firebox of this perspiring steel giant would then lean over the cab door peering back towards the packed carriages, awaiting the stationmaster's green flag and whistle. Then with a mighty roar the Beller would explode in a cloud of steam and with flailing wheels slowly emerge – destination Belfast.

When it comes to something that is memorable, every detail of which can be recalled with awe and nostalgia, one could employ 'mythical' language to describe the experience. Myth doesn't refer to a story that isn't true but to an experience so unique that it can only be expressed in symbolic language like today's Gospel account of the Transfiguration.

So, let us remind ourselves how the story begins; 'Jesus took Peter, James and John and went up the mountain to pray. While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzlingly white. And behold two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah' (Luke 9: 28-36). Jesus' initial followers must have seen something in this itinerant preacher that most people hadn't noticed. They were convinced that he was more than a Capernaum carpenter who had closed shop and had started travelling to neighbouring villages and synagogues, sharing his insights into God's kingdom among us. Those who touched Jesus were actually touching God. He was the one who mirrored the faith they found in the scriptures. By having Jesus converse with Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet, Luke is telling his readers that Jesus is the essence of what the scriptures convey in the Law and the Prophets. Jesus' followers eventually began to recognise God's word in his word. And the subject matter of their conversation was the 'exodus' that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem'. Just as the ancient Israelites had been freed from slavery by going on the original exodus, so Jesus' disciples will be freed from whatever enslaves them by accompanying him to Jerusalem and joining in his dying and rising.

Just one problem: what's this about Peter making three tents? To understand Peter's remark we must appreciate the Jewish feast of Succoth or Tents. It occurs every autumn, commemorating the grape and olive harvest, a time when harvesters lived in tents, like farmers' children long ago in parts of Ireland living in 'bothogs' on high level land and caring for sheep and goats in summertime (Buailteachas). During their forty years of wandering in the wilderness these freed slaves also lived in tents. Though they went through many trials, Yahweh was especially present during these years, appearing at opportune times and personally speaking to them through Moses helping them survive their ordeals. When later the Israelites felt hard pressed and prayed to Yahweh to help them overcome their troubles, they often conceived of that help as a return to Yahweh's presence in the exodus. God would return once again to their daily lives. As in the days of yore, they'd live in tents and have Yahweh close at hand. It's that feast that Peter is referring to when he talks about building three tents. God is present in this man who they are willing to follow to Jerusalem and beyond. The voice from heaven reinforces their insight; 'This is my chosen son - listen to him'. (v.35)