

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD

*Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9*

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."

### REFLECTION 1:

### THE TRANSFIGURATION

The story is told about the time George Bernard Shaw attended a concert given by the violinist Jascha Heifetz. Shaw wrote the following letter when he got home:

*Dear Mr. Heifetz,*

*My wife and I were overwhelmed by your concert. If you can continue to play with such beauty, you will certainly die young. No one can play with such perfection without provoking the jealousy of the gods. I earnestly implore you to play something badly every night before going to bed.*

Now, beneath Shaw's humour is a description of what psychologists term a peak experience. The violinist Heifetz had played with such beauty that his music moved Shaw and his wife to emotional depths they never knew existed. It was an evening of ecstasy for them - a peak experience they would never forget.

Today's Gospel tells the story of another peak experience, namely Jesus' transfiguration in the presence of his 3 disciples. The transfiguration story abounds with symbols which indicates that it was a unique experience for them. For instance, the high mountain recalls the Mount Sinai revelations of the Old Testament and the dazzling face of Jesus suggests the face of Moses during the Exodus and the angels of the empty tomb of Easter. The brief but vivid appearances of Moses and Elijah symbolise that the law and the prophets are now fulfilled in Christ. The falling down to the ground by the disciples anticipates their homage when they will later behold the risen Lord.

We may very well ask then what was the purpose of this peak experience for the disciples? Why would Jesus give them a preview of his glory? Now, to answer these questions, we have to look at the context of the transfiguration story. It follows immediately upon Our Lord's prediction of his own passion and death, and his declaration that his disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross.

Jesus' transfiguration seems intended to strengthen the disciples' faith so that when Jesus dies on the cross, they will be able to look beyond their own sufferings to the glory that waits them. When we experience hurt or pain, the feeling of weakness and distress as a result of an illness, when we go through failure and brokenness, loss or death, we can survive because of our faith, i.e. that all these things will ultimately be transformed. Our vision of the glory that awaits us will not remove our troubles and difficulties, but it will keep us believing and trying in spite of them.

We are told that marathon runners "hit the wall", around the 20-mile mark; and it is then that they feel like giving up. But if they can somehow picture the finishing line and the cheering crowds awaiting them, then they can find deep down inside themselves, the necessary strength to continue running to the end.

That's something like what the transfiguration can do for us - it gives us a glimpse of the glory that lies ahead of us - a glimpse so powerful that it can keep us going when we want to quit - to call up extra strength when we think that we have none left and renew our hopes when everything seems hopeless. Our memory of the transfiguration will not always be a peak experience, like listening to Heifetz play the violin - but it will give us strength to carry our cross and follow the Lord. It will give us that energy to keep going in spite of depression, recession and if I may say it today, a shortage of ready cash. Regardless of the tasks or challenges that lie ahead of us, we can take them on with confidence, because Jesus says to us, as he said to his disciples: "Get up. Do not be afraid. Let us go to Jerusalem together."