

Transfiguration 2017

And he went out and wept bitterly. This is Peter outside the house of Caiaphas following his denial of Jesus. It is possibly the sadness most pitiful moment in the New Testament. Peter has struggled so much to understand who this person Jesus of Nazareth is. He has been with him from the beginning and has experienced some extraordinary things. Huge gatherings of people, miracles, the danger, the excitement, the fear. Peter experienced both sides of living with Jesus, the exhilaration, the confusion, the joy and the sadness. He experienced The Transfiguration and he wanted to hang on to that moment, he wanted that moment to go on forever...and it has all ended here alone, ashamed...desolation.

When I was very young we didn't have a TV, but the radio was always on, I remember it well, it was a valve set, pre transistors. I have vague memories of the music that came from it, I suppose it was the soundtrack to those very early years. I remember this one:

*Rows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons ev'rywhere
I've looked at clouds that way*

*But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on ev'ryone
So many things I would have done
But clouds got in the way*

It's Joni Mitchell's 1967 classic 'Both sides now,' in it she likens clouds to life and love, they are beautiful, glorious yes and yet painful, disturbing, destructive. The feast of the Transfiguration is traditionally celebrated on August 6. It is a date that many remember because it is the day that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The mushroom cloud heralded the dawning of the nuclear age; I recall vividly living under the threat of annihilation during the Cold War. It was a cloud of fear. The cloud on Mount Tabor pointed to the future in a different way, it revealed the nature of Jesus, his standing in the line of the Moses and Elijah, his divinity; it was a foretaste of the resurrection. It was a cloud of hope.

The church has called us to hear the account of this event today because this is the last Sunday before we begin our Lenten journey. It is a journey that in one sense is framed between two events that the same disciples experienced. Once again fear and hope come to the fore. Today, Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a high mountain apart from the crowds. On the eve of the Passion on Maundy Thursday evening we will hear that Jesus takes Peter, James and John part from the others in the Garden of Gethsemane. These events frame our Lenten journey.

The event of the Transfiguration of Jesus, his metamorphosis, is described in all three of the synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, so it is a significant story in the gospel

tradition. But importantly the three gospel writers place the story in the same context, and this makes the story even more significant. The event of the Transfiguration takes place immediately following the Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus' response, his prediction that he will go to Jerusalem be handed over to the authorities tried and executed.

On the eve of Maundy Thursday we will read of that event when Jesus is arrested and handed over to the authorities. Peter, James and John are there, it goes very badly for them, they flee and Jesus is alone, Peter denies him and he weeps. The gospel writers are stressing that Jesus' nature, his very being, his life, his work, and ultimately his resurrection cannot be understood unless it is through the prism of suffering, through a trial. They are all saying that our hope, the very essence of our faith can only be understood through suffering. So this week we will commence our journey to the cross.

When the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki a doctor by the name Tashaki Nagai was in his room at the Medical School of Nagasaki University. The building was destroyed and Tashaki was seriously injured. But he went on to write a book called the Bells of Nagasaki, so called because after the blast the bells of the Cathedral continued to ring and it was one of the first buildings re constructed after the war. In the book he describes the awful events of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

It will not be easy to construct a new Japan on the ruins of the old Japan we loved. But we will get inspiration, from the example of one who sweated blood and carried his cross to Calvary. As his cross had value, ours has value too. And so our story of the bomb is one of triumph. It is a story of resurrection in the very moment of crucifixion. It is a story of chiming bells that announce good news as they peal across the atomic waste.

Nagai felt that God had somehow sent the nuclear cloud; as a judgment on war, as an end to war. He saw the suffering which the nuclear cloud caused as an invitation to share in the sufferings of Christ. The cross which Christ bore brought resurrection. Nagai felt that the cross borne by the people of Nagasaki , himself, his people, had the same value.

The Transfiguration was a glimpse of the resurrection, both events came after the disciples had experienced fear, horror, doubt, despair, misunderstanding, failure I could go on. Cross and resurrection they must go together, on their own they are almost meaningless, on their own we really won't know life at all.

*I've looked at life from both sides now
From up and down, and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all*

Lent is a time to lay aside life's illusions, engage with life as Jesus revealed it to us, yes it's difficult, painful, fearful but ultimately glorious. *Tis God Lord to be here. Amen.*