

Lent 2B Transfiguration

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It was a mystery of light. There they were on the mountain; his body was transfigured before them, his clothes dazzling white. **Could they not** stay bathing in that glory forever? Must they come down that mountain and take the hard path to Jerusalem, and so to the darkness of Calvary? **Could they** summon up the fidelity of Abraham whose faith was tested on Mount Moriah by the perplexing demands of God? Yes, today's Gospel is about light, but it is about momentary light. For the most part faith, by its nature, means moving on in a certain darkness. We hold on to those moments of light whenever they come in our lives, the glimpses of God that we experience.

We have heard the story of the Transfiguration many times, but this year's reading from Mark's Gospel, set in contrast with the testing of Abraham's faith, gives the episode a darker tone. It seems to bring to the fore the perennial question of how we move ahead in faith. We sometimes get troubled by our own **faithlessness**. Ours is a human faith that comes served with doubt and questions. Our human condition brings with it **fears and struggles** in the face of life's darker mysteries.

Sometimes God seems to play **hide and seek** with us. He gives us just enough faith to seek him, but never enough to fully find him. "*You are a God who lies hidden*" said the prophet Isaiah. The *Deus Absconditus*, the Hidden God. Job put it a little more strongly: "*Why do you hide your face and count me as an enemy?*" "*How faint the whisper we hear of him.*" In Solomon's day his presence filled the temple, in *Hezekiah's day* he withdrew. "*Why do you stand afar off?*" asks the psalmist and sometimes so do we.

The Bible knows of God hiding his face, but the story continues with the mystics: "*God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away*" says Meister Eckhart. Julian of Norwich would find that at one moment she was "filled with everlasting sureness" but next she finds herself "*in heaviness and weariness of my life, and irksomeness of myself I scarcely could have patience to live.*" Her spiritual moods rose and fell like a seesaw. Our spiritual moods are perhaps less dramatic, but no less real.

Perhaps the most surprising example of this spiritual climate change is a recent one: Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

It started with light. Her moment of transfiguration came when her superiors told her to go on retreat in the Himalayan foothills. At this stage she was a Loreto Sister, 17 years a teacher in Calcutta and working herself into the ground. On the journey to the retreat, Christ, she said, spoke to her. He called her to abandon teaching and work instead in "the slums" of the city, dealing directly with "the poorest of the poor" - the sick, the dying, beggars and street children. "*Come, Come, carry Me into the holes of the poor,*" he told her. "*Come be My light.*" And of course she was his light. The saint of the gutters in her blue-bordered sari became a living embodiment of Christ's love going to those in most desperate need.

But the publication of her letters reveals that for the last half century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever. She didn't lose her faith, but she just the comfort of it. She lived a deep and abiding **spiritual pain**, using words like of 'dryness', 'darkness', 'loneliness' and even 'torture'. What is it like when God goes silent and hides behind the clouds?

"Jesus has a very special love for you" she wrote to someone in a letter. "As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." "I am told God loves, me" she wrote to another "yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul".

She had come down with a bump from Mount Tabor, and found herself dumped on Mount Calvary at the foot of the cross, for companions the poorest of the poor. She could share in the dark prayer of Christ in the moment of his agony: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."* This prayer of abandonment that is still the prayer of a believer.

Mother Theresa lived what St John of the Cross called the 'dark night of the soul.' It is nothing fancy, it describes that spiritual aridity or dryness that we can all experience. She had passed quickly from Tabor to Calvary and stood at the foot of the cross for 50 years.

But that was not the end. A redeeming experience of her life came when she realised that the night of her heart was the special share she had in Christ's passion. She was able to say *"I have come to love the darkness - for I believe now that it is part of a very, very small part of Jesus' darkness & pain on earth."* She was able to integrate this experience of darkness into her spiritual life: *"If ever I become a saint", she wrote, "I will surely be one of darkness".*

Now our spiritual lives seem trivial and mundane in comparison. Yet I think it is comforting to learn from her and the spiritual tradition that the darkness we can experience need not be frightening. The silence we seem to meet in prayer, the dryness, the seeming emptiness can somehow be brought into our prayer. Darkness does not mean the absence of a spiritual life, but is part of the spiritual life. *"Even the darkness is not dark to you"* says the psalmist. It is okay. *"A light has shone in the darkness and the darkness could not overpower it."* Tabor may seem a distant memory, but God is an ever present reality, in darkness and in light. It might even be that we are closer to God in the darkness.

When in 1970 Malcolm Muggeridge expressed his doubts to Mother Theresa she met them head-on. His doubts were not to get in the way. In a way, he seemed to have the same struggles as her. She wrote *"Your longing for God is so deep and yet He keeps Himself away from you. He must be forcing Himself to do so - because he loves you so much - the personal love Christ has for you is infinite - The Small difficulty you have re His Church is finite - Overcome the finite with the infinite."* Muggeridge apparently did and became a well known convert.

In those Lenten words, the Isaiah says: *"If you do away with the yoke, the clenched fist, the wicked words, if you give your bread to the hungry and relief to the oppressed your light will rise in the darkness and your shadows become like noon."* That was Mother Theresa - she was camped out in a dark place for 50 years but became his light. Mother Teresa wasn't 'feeling' Christ's love. She was up at 4.30 every morning... giving it. She shows us what faith and love really is. Christianity is about loving, come rain or shine, darkness or light.

Mount Tabor is a momentary support in the life of faith. For those days we are plunged into the darkness, we shouldn't be frightened or swayed. In those moments we don't feel holy or faithful, it doesn't mean we are not - our emotions are not always reliable indicators.

We should simply step into the path of Christ's love and allow our light to rise in the darkness too. He says to us: *"Come, be my light."*