

Transfiguration SFX 2023

The story of the Transfiguration is familiar to us. Peter, James and John got caught up in an experience that they hoped would last forever. "We had seen his majesty for ourselves" says St Peter. But it was momentary. On that holy mountain they saw their Divine Lord, dazzling, his face shining, clothes white as light. But then they were brought down to earth. They saw only Jesus the man, the earthly reality of the one on his way to Calvary and the Cross. Yet that glimpse would sustain them on the way.

But a question I would like to put before you today is: **what sustains us on our journey of faith.** How do we stay on the road? How do we keep going?

Writing shortly after the Second Vatican Council, the renowned theologian Karl Rahner made what at first sight seems an extraordinary statement. "*The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.*" He spoke of a time when individual Christians would no longer be supported by living in a Christian society and a Christian culture.

Are there any mystics here? Most of us would not put our hands up to being mystics. We are rather practical people. Down to earth. Not given to spiritual flights of fancy and certainly the visions and divine interventions that we read about in the lives of the saints are not part of most people's experience.

But there is a profound truth in what Rahner says. He is not talking about extraordinary phenomena or the paranormal. For him a mystic is one who finds the presence of God precisely in our own experiences, in the ordinary, the day to day. Among theologians perhaps no-one has done more to highlight the graced character of all human existence. For him, God is always present as holy mystery in our human experiences and it is the church's task to point ever anew to this basic experience of God. God in our laughing, our loving, our hoping, our questioning. God in our doing and our being.

He challenges us to become contemplatives. All of us. Not just monks in monasteries or nuns in nunneries. All of us. Because if we try to live out our faith as mere ritual, observance or commandments we will not be sustained over the long haul. If we don't learn to see in ourselves and others, Christ living in us, loving in us, suffering in us, crying in us, glorying in us then our Christian life can become a bit of an empty shell and we will really struggle to survive in our life of faith. This is all the more true in a secular culture. We are those Christians of the Future.

Perhaps this feast of the Transfiguration is an invitation to nurture our contemplative side. Those glimpses of the glory of God can help sustain us on our way.

1) Begin by looking within. At Baptism we were clothed in a white garment. This reminded the Church Fathers of the Transfiguration. We were clothed in that dazzling white of Christ. The deepest reality of our being is that we are in Christ. Whether we feel it or not, think it or not that is our profound understanding that God is in me, Christ is at work in me. St Paul who applies the mystery of Tabor directly to us in the letter to the Corinthians. He says **we are transfigured**. The word in Greek would be familiar to anyone who has done a bit of Biology. It is metamorphosis. St Paul uses it to describe our transformation in Christ. We are changed.

To be a mystic is simply to tune into this fact, to bring our minds to conscious awareness of an objective reality. We allow this knowledge of God to permeate the whole of our daily living after the model of Christ Jesus. In baptism we are already caught up in the life that makes mystics of us. We just need to tune in.

2) We also need to look outside of ourselves. Flannery O'Connor was a Catholic novelist in the deep south of the US. She said it was harder to write as a Catholic because she believed the natural world *contains* the supernatural. A Catholic sees more deeply into things and finds God there. There is a deeper meaning to be discovered in things. God is in the ordinary, in the twists and turns of life. The Christian novelist, she said *lives in a larger universe*.

It is quite often the poet or the novelist who can help us see "heaven in ordinary," heaven in a grain of sand, this *larger universe* in the ordinary dimensions of human existence. Gerard Manley Hopkins could see the world "charged with the grandeur of God", could see "Christ playing in ten thousand places lovely in limbs and in eyes not his." Elizabeth Barrett Browning's evoked the sacredness of the created world: "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."

The saints and spiritual writers can also help us live in this *larger universe*. Julian of Norwich could see in a hazelnut the whole world held together by God's love, and St Benedict the whole world suffused with divine light. Benedict taught us to see the sacredness of all that exists in the crockery and utensils of the kitchen and that God is to be glorified in all things. St Francis saw God in the stars and in the skies, the birds of the air and all living creatures.

But it is here at Mass that we come to realise that it is quite natural for us to be contemplatives or mystics, it is just we would never use such fancy words. As Catholics we quite naturally live in this larger universe. In the spoken word we hear Christ's voice, in Bread and Wine we taste his presence. In a crumb of bread we encounter the divine. Whole worlds are brought into being at this altar. Christ in his death and resurrection. Saviour, Lamb, Shepherd, King. God with us. Emmanuel. We never come in to an empty Church. God is here.

The feast of Transfiguration is not just about remembering an historical event. It is an invitation for us to open our eyes and see more deeply. To become Contemplatives each of us. "We beheld his glory." And we behold his glory still. Glimpses of heaven as we go about our day-to-day affairs, if only we turn and see.

The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.