

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD

Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14 Psalm 97 2 Peter 1: 16-19 Mark 9: 2-10

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Daniel reading fits with the feast, but it also fits with summer. Summer movies are out, blockbusters with lots of special effects to draw the young—and to cash in on huge profits. In the light of such movies as “Mission Impossible 2” and “X-Men” (described as having “eye popping spectacle” and “battling mutants with superhuman powers”), this Daniel reading fits right in. It has a blazing throne, “wheels of burning fire,” “surging stream of fire” and a cast of “thousands and thousands,” with “myriads upon myriads” in attendance. There are visions to rivet one’s attention: one “like a Son of man” coming on clouds of heaven; the Ancient One whose “clothing was snow bright” and whose hair is “white as wool.” There... don’t those images rival the current crop of summer blockbusters?

The gospel keeps the spectacles flowing: we have the mysterious high mountain; Jesus’ transfiguration; the dazzling white clothes; the appearance from the dead of Elijah and Moses; the cloud and then that really big voice from the cloud. All the making of engrossing spectacle and in mid-summer, all to shake awake our attention, lest we be lulled by the smell of barbecue and the sound of lawn mowers on warm evenings. We really need to be shaken awake from the more profound hypnotic spell of the good times our country is currently enjoying. “Let the good times roll.”—as long as they are rolling in our favor. Like Peter on the mountain, the presence of a really good thing would make any one of us want to hold on to what we have within our grasp. Let’s not look beyond this moment, no further than our own fingertips; let’s stay where we are. “How good it is to be here.”

There is a lot in our world to keep us self-focused and nearsighted. Ronald Rolheiser (see this week’s book recommendation below) has a terrific book on spirituality for our age in which he lists the forces that have helped erode both our communal and private faith.

“What are these antifaith forces? They are not the product of some conscious conspiracy by godlessness. They are, instead, all those things, good and bad, within us and around us that tempt us away from prayer, from self-sacrifice, from being more communal, from being willing to sweat blood in a garden in order to keep our integrity and commitments, and from mustering up the time and courage to enter deeply into our own souls.

Hence they are not abstract, foreign forces. They live in the house with us and are as comfortable to us as a well-worn shoe. What blocks faith is that myriad of innocent things within our ordinary, normal lives which precisely make our lives comfortable: our laziness, our self-indulgence, our ambition, our restlessness, our envy, our refusal to live in tension, our consumerism, our greed for things and experience, our need to have a certain lifestyle, our busyness and overextension, our perpetual tiredness, our obsessions with celebrities and our perpetual distraction with sports, sit-come and talk shows. (Page 217)

In Mark's gospel, suffering and sacrifice are essential elements of discipleship. Just before they came up the mountain, Jesus predicted his future suffering and death and when Peter objected to this kind of talk, Jesus reprimanded him and called him by the Tempter's name—Satan. Jesus goes on to tell them, "If you wish to come after me, you must first deny your very self, take up your cross and follow in my steps." And his steps are soon to take him into Jerusalem where he will face his cross. The voice from the clouds supports what Jesus has been telling his disciples, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." As they come down the mountain they will be met by a large crowd and the father of a boy "possessed by a mute spirit." The difficult task of ministry awaits the disciples. No wonder they want to stay where life is cushy, comfortable and sure. Until the resurrection, the road Jesus will take his disciples will be all downhill--- going from bad to worse.

We all experience moments of transfiguration. Our first love and the early days of being in love; graduation and wedding days; the time we hold our newborn child or grandchild; sexual intimacy; winning a race; finishing a big project we have labored months on at work; entering our first new home or apartment, etc. The feeling is eternal, it will never end, we will never have to return to the ordinary. How good it is for us to be here.

But mountain air can be heady, giddy and even dangerous. Reality is earthbound and every day. After the honeymoon: the garbage has to be taken out; the diapers changed; bills paid; parents visited in nursing homes; integrity maintained; long-suffering kindness nurtured; sickness endured; the poor at our doors; the overwhelming social issues and the scandals in our churches. Today we turn to our religious celebration in the midst of all this. The readings today keep us hopeful, but sober. There are no quick fixes, no guaranteed remedies for the doldrums and the struggles, just the ongoing reminder that our faith is in the One who walked our

path, all the way down the mountain to death. But his fidelity to God's way, even unto death, was crowned by God's raising him from death. His way is our way and his Spirit is our Spirit—the Spirit of fidelity to discipleship, the Spirit of trust as we walk down the mountain.

I am sure the disciples, before they left the mountain that day, glanced wistfully over their shoulders at the place where things had been so clear for them. They must have hated to leave that place of ecstasy, contentment and vision, especially with the earlier stark teaching Jesus had given about the inevitability of suffering for those who would follow him, still ringing in their ears. We too look over our shoulders. When life's "transfiguration moments" have ended, we glance back over our shoulders at the wedding hall; recall the first days of parenthood; finger through a scrap book of athletic victories; play the videos of past family gatherings, seeing faces of loved ones now aged or dead. There's a Peter in each of us, wanting to hold on those moments that feel so special and unending. "What's wrong with that?" Nothing, except we know we can't press the "pause button" on life, it's not a video and not under our control anyway. And more—Jesus has told us clearly that to follow him means to serve others and to suffer the rejection of those around us, even those in our own households.

The Transfiguration glance-back we are doing today at this liturgy is to remind ourselves the One, whom the Book of Daniel describes as having "everlasting dominion," shall return again. When he does, nothing will ever take that moment from us, we will never have to leave that place again. Mark also reminds us that it isn't just in the glory moments of life that God is present to us. The Transfiguration showed the disciples that beneath the everyday appearance of Jesus, the divine dwelt. So, it is in our lives now--- most likely a long way from any mountain top epiphany. Where is the divine present to us? Who in our daily lives bring the assurance of God to us, dressed up in everyday garb, speaking in an ordinary way? And at this Eucharist, who is with us as food enough for this day under the appearance of daily food and a plain cup?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Ronald Rolheiser, *THE HOLY LONGING: THE SEARCH FOR CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY*. New York: Doubleday. 1999, hardcover, \$21.95.

This book can serve at least two purposes. It is a very fine commonsense overview

of the basics of Christian spirituality for the everyday person. It also makes good reading for the preacher as it articulates areas of daily spirituality that are often the subjects of our preachings—or should be!

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org