

August 6, 2017 St. Kilian Parish (Diocese of Pittsburgh)
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Masses

Solemnity of the Transfiguration of the Lord

I don't know about you, but for me, it's really hard to believe that this is the first Sunday of August. Summer is speeding by; vacation time is winding down; back to school ads and sales are in full swing.

For the most part most of us do well when there's a routine in our lives to follow—a sense of normalcy and a rhythm of life that we can expect and count on. But every once in a while, it's not only nice, but important, to have a change of pace—an opportunity to step back and get a fresh/new perspective.

I am just returning from a week's vacation on the Outer Banks of North Carolina with 42 members of my family. There's nothing like family togetherness for a week, with 14 of those 42 family members being 13 years of age and under, to provide for me, as a celibate priest used to living alone, with a much bigger and whole different perspective to life. It was great, but I have to admit that I'm looking forward to returning to normal.

This Feast of the Transfiguration celebrates one of those defining moments, both in the life of Jesus, as well as in the lives of His three closest Apostles.

For the last several weeks, in our Sunday Gospel Readings, Jesus has been going to great lengths to try to help His disciples (and us) understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about. To do that, Jesus told a number of parables—stories or analogies—which were designed to help His disciples get even a little bit of clarity as to what God's Kingdom was compared to the Kingdom of this world. He told the parable about the "Sower and the Seed"; the parable about the Weeds and the Wheat; parables about the mustard seed, and the parable about yeast; and last week, Jesus told the parable about the treasure hidden in a field, and the pearl of great price. All of those parables were aimed by Jesus at helping us, in our limited human understanding, to grasp the mysteries of God.

But today, Jesus seems to decide that the old adage "a picture is worth 1000 words" is a better way to go, at least for a select few of His closest Apostles.

So, Jesus invites Peter, James and John to go up to the top of Mt. Tabor, and there, St. Matthew tells us, "He was transfigured before them". Matthew describes the effects of the Transfiguration: "His face shone like the sun; His clothes became white as light". That sounds very similar to our first Reading in which the Prophet Daniel revealed the prophecy about "the Ancient One", taking His throne, with His clothing "bright as snow", the hair on His Head as white as wool, and His throne with "flames of fire".

Instead of continuing to try to teach the Apostles what the Kingdom of Heaven was like, Jesus decided to show them the reality of Who He is. And what they saw filled them with good, old-fashioned “Fear of the Lord”, which as we know, is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is sometimes also known as “Wonder and Awe”. It’s similar to seeing some great force of nature, like Niagara Falls, or the beauty of a gorgeous sunset at the beach, or the preciousness of a new-born, innocent baby. In each case, we are filled with “Godly fear” or “wonder and awe” in the face of the majesty, power and goodness of God.

Once Jesus was able to get Peter, James and John’s attention, as He was joined by Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets of Old, the real point of this miracle of the Transfiguration took place when the Voice of God spoke from out of the cloud, with the message: “This is My beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.”

There’s an interesting, long-standing theological question that is often asked about the miracle of the Transfiguration: was the miracle that Jesus was changed in His appearance to show Himself as He truly is, as the Son of God? OR, was the miracle the fact that Peter, James and John were changed, allowing them to see Jesus for Who He always is, but because of our human limitations and sinfulness, we are kept from being able to see? An interesting question; what do you think? Whatever the answer, they were able to see Jesus, and they were privileged to hear the Father’s directive to listen to His Son, because they took a step back; because they accepted Jesus’ invitation to pause from their normal and routine lives to look at life from a different perspective.

Dear Friends, there is beauty, wonder, power, and the Presence of God all around us if we stop, and take the time to look—to consider—to see with eyes of faith and love. Do we make sure that we take time in our daily routines and schedules to pause and look for God? Do we take time to spend in prayer with God each day to help us keep that Godly perspective to our daily responsibilities?

I recently attended the Convocation of Catholic Leaders in Orlando, Fla., at the beginning of July which brought together more than 3,000 lay leaders, religious, priests and bishops from almost every Diocese in the country, to discuss Pope Francis’ Call for all of us to be more zealous and joyful about our relationship with Jesus Christ, and in turn, to be what Pope Francis calls all of us to be: “missionary disciples”—people who not only believe in the Good News of Jesus’ Salvation of the world, but who also are not afraid to, and in fact are anxious to, share that Good News with others. Of all the many excellent presentations that were made over those three days, the one that stands out in my mind was by a religious woman, Sister Miriam, who shared her own amazing conversion story that was quite dramatic. But what was most impressive was that she was clearly so deeply in love with God, and she talked about allowing for time in each day’s schedule at Mass to just be in God’s Presence, and to use her words, “to let Him gaze upon me, and in turn for me to gaze upon Jesus Present in the Eucharist”.

To be gazed at by someone who loves you is unique to that special relationship. We see it as a mother/father of a newborn baby will spend long periods of time just “gazing” upon their precious miracle of life. We see it in newlyweds who can’t get enough of just looking at one another in love. Isn’t it a shame when that stops,---when we no longer gaze at our loved ones, perhaps because we become busy with daily responsibilities, or because we get into the mode of “taking them for granted”.

The Transfiguration event was Jesus’ gift to Peter, James and John. Even though Peter wanted to stay there and build three tents/booths, Jesus insisted that they had to come back down the mountain---back to normalcy. The reason for that is so that He could make His way to Jerusalem where, as He had already told the Apostles, He would be betrayed, suffer, be tortured, die, and then rise on the third day.

Peter, James, and John couldn’t possibly understand that at this moment. But Jesus gave them the grace of the Transfiguration that would help them at the moment of Jesus’ Dis-figuration on Calvary. Only after Jesus was raised on Easter, with even greater glory that they had just witnessed on the mountaintop through the Transfiguration, only then would Peter, James and John be able to understand completely and begin to do what God the Father had told them——to Listen to Jesus, and to preach the Good news to the ends of the earth.

That’s our job as well, dear Friends in Christ. We are to faithfully live our lives, amidst all the routines of our daily schedules, but with that constant openness to see the beauty and grandeur of God all around us—to never allow ourselves to be so busy that we miss the “wonder and awe” of the world and the people in our lives——that we keep faithful to God’s directive to Listen to His Son, Jesus, through His Church of which we are to be faithful members and “missionary disciples” of the Good News of Jesus.

We live in this world, surrounded by beauty and the signs of the Kingdom of Heaven——but as we all know, this is not where we will live forever. We are people with a destiny, to live with God forever in Heaven.

As we celebrate Jesus’ Transfiguration, we too are called to be “transformed” into His Love through this Holy Eucharist. May we say today, with Peter: “Lord, it is good that we are here.” But may we also be ready to return to our homes, our families, our work, what’s left of our summer vacation, to where ever God leads us——better prepared to keep “listening to Jesus”, with our eyes and hearts fixed on the amazing “wonder and awe” of the beauty of God’s creation all around us, and in the hope for the life of the world to come.