

Despite countless healings of the sick, large crowds coming out to hear him, miracles of feeding the hungry, they were still a small band of disciples. They had followed Him for a few years with not much to show for it except threats from the rulers of occupied Israel and the religious authorities. They wondered if the only reason people came out to hear him was for a diversion, and entertainment, a distraction from everyday drudgery. And maybe a good argument.

They probably wondered, ‘Who are you anyway?’!! And now Jesus wants to go up to Jerusalem. Doesn’t he understand the danger to himself and to his small band of loyal followers?

But they keep following him, nevertheless. Pondering, bickering amongst themselves about who should be the greatest among them, and who should sit next to him in this kingdom he keeps talking about.

Then Jesus invites three of his closest friends to come with him up on a mountain to pray, they willingly go, unprepared for what is to happen next. Seeing Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus in a visionary experience, and then hearing a voice saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” is astonishing, in fact overwhelming. They fall to the ground in fear.

You will doubtless have had the experience of your spouse taking on the likeness their father or mother – this may only be a trick of the light, but when they begin to behave like him or her – well that a completely different ballgame and may illicit the sort of trembling the disciples experienced on the mountain that day!

Is this a fairytale?

Some readers dismiss this story as a bizarre fiction.

Suetonius (75–160) derided Christians as mischievous: Tacitus (c. 60–120) sneered at their "pernicious superstitions".

Decades after the transfiguration Peter appealed to their terrifying experience precisely to rebut criticisms that the early believers followed "cleverly invented stories" as opposed to "eyewitness" accounts of actual

events : *“We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty”* (2 Peter 16).

The details of the story — exactly six days after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the identification of Mount Hermon in present-day Syria which reaches 9,000 feet, the secluded and private nature of the incident, the palpable fear they exhibited, Peter's impulsive outburst, and their confusion about something so essential as the resurrection from the dead — all these unflattering details suggest that the evangelists were writing history and not myth or metaphor.

Whether Peter, James and John had an ecstatic vision, or whether Jesus was literally if briefly "metamorphosed" before their very eyes, the natural, physical phenomenon of brilliant light was secondary to the supernatural, metaphysical affirmation of the voice from the cloud — this Jesus whom the disciples followed was not just an itinerant rabbi, a clever sage, a socio-political provocateur, a subversive wisdom teacher, an ascetic, or a failed apocalyptic troublemaker. The transfiguration portrays Jesus as the Cosmic Lord of all human history. He is God's beloved and specially anointed Son. The ramifications of this are obvious: "Listen to him!".

The word "transfigured" is a very interesting word. The Greek word is "metamorpho" and it means to transform, literally or figuratively to metamorphose, or to change. It means to change into another form. It also means to change the outside to match the inside. In the case of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ it means to match the outside with the reality of the inside: to change the outward so that it matches the inward reality. Jesus' divine nature was "veiled" in human form and the transfiguration was a glimpse of that glory. And for the second time the voice of God attests to the truth of Jesus' Sonship. The Son of God came to earth in the form of a man to be the true servant of God and to gift mankind with the greatest gift ever given, eternal life. The transfiguration of Jesus Christ was a visible sign in the presence of reliable witnesses of the reality of the power of God and of his loving purpose. Jesus radically recalls our humanity and affirms our nature with his divinity. The Kingdom of God has entered the world in human form, and we are called to witness to that Good News.

The same God who presides at the Transfiguration of Jesus and promises us that one day we will be transformed into his likeness, empowering us to live like people of conviction and redemption in a world badly in need of both. Will there be days of frustration and doubt? Yes. But the mission to proclaim God's kingdom and to witness it however we are called to do so remains unchanged.

His true nature is revealed in glory. What had previously been hidden beneath the ordinariness of his daily life is made manifest to the privileged disciples who witness it—Peter, James and John. The Transfiguration story is thus unique among the stories about the ministry of Jesus.

The sequence of events in Matthew's Gospel also shows us very plainly that the transfiguration was meant to be interpreted in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. References to Jesus' death literally surround the transfiguration story, and Jesus told his disciples not to discuss what they had seen until after his resurrection. Clearly, he wanted them to view the transfiguration in that specific context.

But, is it possible that whoever compiled the Lectionary readings for today made a serious omission by isolating this story of the Transfiguration from what happened next? The disciples and Jesus came off the mountain, and they came right down to the bottom of the valley where they found a boy who was having epileptic seizures. The mother and father were enormously upset and worried about the desperately sick boy, and the little boy fell into a fire and burned himself. In other words, the disciples came down off that mountaintop right into the problems of real life. It is as though God never meant us to live on the mountaintop. Down from their mountaintop experience and into the real world again, the disciples discovered that God is also down in the valley and does not live only or even primarily on the mountaintop.

Henry Drummond, the Scottish theologian once said, *“God does not make the mountains to be inhabited. God does not make the mountaintops for us to live on the mountaintops. It is not God's desire that we live on the mountaintops. We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader vision of*

the earthly surroundings below. But we don't live there. We don't tarry there. The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below."

“Get off the mountain” God said to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 1. 6-8), and (paraphrase) I have somewhere else for you to go!”

A little boy was out in his front yard, throwing a ball up in the air. An elderly passer-by asked the boy what he was doing. He replied, “I am playing a game of catch with God. I throw the ball up in the air and he throws it back.” What goes up must come down. Except of course Charlie Brown's kite! But as a rule, whatever goes up must come down. The same process applies to our religious lives. It is a good thing to “go up” to a great experience with God, but we will become greatly disillusioned if we do not remember that eventually we have to “come down” again.

A Sufi puts it his way:

The mountain is the mind.

Within man, the mind is the mountain!

Sometimes one becomes too mental,
and needs to come down from the mountain.

One should retreat from the mountain of the mind,
and go into the valley of the heart.

It's called "Hearts-Work".

One can't stay on the peak of the mountain forever.

One must eventually journey into the valley of the heart.

Jesus turns to his friends and says that it is time for them to go down the mountain, and he will walk with them on their journey as they are to listen to him. In his autobiography *Now And Then*, Frederick Buechner the novelist and Priest wrote about listening to God:

“Because the word that God speaks to us is always an incarnate word—a word spelled out to us not alphabetically, in syllables, but enigmatically, in events, even in the books we read and the movies we see—the chances are we will never get it just right. We are so used to hearing what we want to hear and remaining deaf to what it would be well for us to hear that it is hard to break the habit. But if we keep our hearts and minds open as well

as our ears, if we listen with patience and hope, if we remember at all deeply and honestly, then I think we come to recognize, beyond all doubt, that, however faintly we may hear him, he is indeed speaking to us, and that, however little we may understand of it, his word to each of us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling. In that sense autobiography becomes a way of praying, and a book like this, if it matters at all, matters mostly as a call to prayer.

What does Jesus tell Peter and the boys: “Get up. Don’t be afraid”, and then they go down the mountain to listen to the pain and fear of their neighbours and to bring in healing. We are about to enter Lent. This is a time for listening as we individually and corporately walk with Jesus, listening, looking at our lives as a call to prayer.

Listen. There is a difference between listening and hearing. Hearing means that your brain has isolated some noises so that it can try to make sense of those noises. Listening means to slow down, pay attention, live with this for a while, make it part of your being.

Buechner once said: *“If I were called on to state in a few words everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and preacher, it would be something like this: ‘Listen to your Life.’”*

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