

Transfiguration A SML 2017 MT 17:1-9

Three important scenes in the life of Our Blessed Lord took place on mountains:

1. On one, He preached the Beatitudes, which would bring a Cross from the world: “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me”
2. On Mount Tabor, He showed the glory of the Transfiguration, the glory that lay beyond the Cross,
3. and on Mount Calvary, where He offered Himself on the Cross.

The Transfiguration on Mount Tabor took place within a few weeks of Calvary, when He took with Him Peter, James and John:

- ✓ Peter the Rock;
- ✓ James, destined to be the first Apostle martyr; and
- ✓ John who had the privileged intimacy of resting against the chest of Our Blessed Lord at the Last Supper.

All three needed to learn the lesson of the Cross and to rectify their false conceptions of the Messiah. Peter, who more than once, spoke against the necessity of the cross:

As Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him, "God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you."

and, James and John who were nothing more than throne seekers:

Jesus, grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left in your glory.

- ✓ All three were present when he raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead.
- ✓ All three would later sleep in the Garden of Gethsemane.

To believe in His Calvary, Peter, James and John needed to see the glory of the Transfiguration, that shone beyond the scandal of the Cross. And this was something that at least Peter realized, when he said, "Lord, it is good that we are here."

And so, on the mountaintop, Our Blessed Lord was transfigured before them as the glory of His Divinity shown through His garments. It was not so much light that was shining from without as the beauty of God that shone from within. "Light from Light, true God from true God" as it is professed in the Creed.

As:

- ✓ His crib,
- ✓ His carpenter trade, and
- ✓ His bearing disgrace from his enemies

were His humiliation; fittingly there should also be epiphanies of His glory:

- ✓ the angels' singing at His birth,
- ✓ the voice of the Father at His Baptism, and
- ✓ His physical glorification here at His Transfiguration.

What is unique to Matthew's account is the attention paid to the face of Our Blessed Lord:

“His face shown like the sun . . . “

which parallels the description of Moses' face after conversing with Yahweh. See Exodus 34:29ff:

As Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the commandments in his hands, he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while he conversed with the Lord.

There was only one person in all of the Old Testament who saw God's face and that person was Moses. Exodus 33:11 clearly states:

The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another.

But, actually, the Scriptures contradict themselves on even this point, as six verses later, Exodus 33:17 clearly states:

The Lord answered (Moses), “. . . my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives . . . When my glory passes I will set you in the hollow of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by.” Then I will remove my hand, so that you may see my back; but my face is not to be seen.”

Until the time of Our Blessed Lord then, only Moses had seen God's face, and even here, we can't be certain.

So what does the face of God look like? Or even the face of Our Blessed Lord? How many books have been written on the Shroud of Turin, swearing beyond any shadow of a doubt that it's a forgery? How many books swearing to its authenticity? How many experiments have been done trying to recreate an image of Jesus' face?

This past spring, “The Shack” hit the theaters, and several summers ago, the rage was the book entitled The Shack written by William Paul Young, a “guy meets God” novel about a man named Mack whose youngest daughter has been abducted during a family vacation and evidence that she may have been brutally murdered is found in an abandoned shack deep in the

Oregon wilderness. Four years later, Mack receives a suspicious note, apparently from God, inviting him back to that shack for the weekend. There He meets the Trinity . . .

I remember reading this book on the beach, and while my best friend Father Doug was deep inside books written by Benedict XVI, I was deep inside The Shack. In it is a lot of “God humor,” but one scene, about the face of God, the face of Jesus, I found especially funny. Jesus and Mack are on a dock that protrudes into a lake. It was one of those “Lord, it is good that we are here” moments, as Peter said in today’s gospel.

Lying on their backs, the two are staring up at the stars:

“Jesus?”

“Yes, Mackenzie?”

“I am surprised by one thing about you.”

“Really? What?”

“I guess I expected you to be more” – be careful here Mack – “uh . . . well, humanly striking.”

Jesus chuckled. “Humanly striking?” You mean handsome.” Now he was laughing.

“Well, I was trying to avoid that, but yes. Somehow I thought you’d be the ideal man, you know, athletic and overwhelmingly good-looking.”

“It’s my nose, isn’t it?”

Mack didn’t know what to say.

Jesus laughed. “I am Jewish, you know. My grandfather on my mother’s side had a big nose. In fact, most of the men on my mom’s side had big noses.”

“I just thought you’d be better looking.”

“By whose standards? Anyway, once you really get to know me, it won’t matter to you.”

I have to agree with Young. What does matter is being with Jesus. As Peter said so very simply in today’s Gospel, “Lord it is good that we are here.”

One practical way to be with Jesus is to contemplate His face. This practice is really old, going back as far the Old Testament to contemplate the face of God:

- ✓ Psalm 15:4 “always look to the Lord and his strength; always seek his face
- ✓ 1 Chronicles 16:11 “rely on the mighty Lord; constantly seek his face

The early Church Fathers contemplated the face of God. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Colette used to see our Blessed Lord and talk to him just as we talk to one another. An ancient practice, but one that is making a comeback.

In contemplating the face of Jesus, we are not really contemplating the size of his nose as we are picturing Him looking hard at us, staring right at us. And sometimes that chills us. Sometimes that scares us, because we realize He knows us better than we know ourselves.

And if He is looking with disappointment, it is because He is looking at us with love, with mercy, with compassion and with encouragement to improve. And like St. Peter, we simply want to say, "Lord, it is good that we are here."