

Transfiguration (6 August 2023)

“And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening.”

+In the Name...

The end of A.A. Milne’s The House at Pooh Corner is considered by many literary critics to contain one of the saddest endings of any famous children’s book. Naturally, you all have your own list, but when Christopher Robin announces to Pooh that they will no longer be able to spend their days together doing “nothing”, (indeed, one of their favorite pastimes), the adults reading the book immediately understand, even if the children for whom the book is written, not to mention Winnie-the-Pooh, the bear of little brain, do not grasp that same understanding. Christopher Robin is growing up and heading off to boarding school. Change. Ironically, it is the only

constant. No one is left unaffected by it, whether they be anthropomorphic bears or Christ's apostles.

I must confess that I was always a little mystified by the Feast of the Transfiguration. I do not mean in a good way, like how we are not expected to completely understand the Trinity, or how a little piece of not-quite-bread can turn into the very Body of Christ, but I did not really understand what was going on, much less why the Church would celebrate the event. Yet I knew it was important because it is an event that does not just come to us by Holy Tradition, but was recorded by three of the Evangelists in Holy Scripture. Our Lord, along with Peter, James and John go up a mountain to pray. That makes enough sense: one can imagine even in the comparatively technologically-deprived world of first century Jerusalem, one could appreciate getting away from the hustle and bustle and into nature for some uninterrupted prayer time. Indeed they begin to pray, but this is

no ordinary prayer time: Christ was no longer in His usual clothing, but Scripture says His “raiment was white and glistening”. Glistening? Not a common word in contemporary English. The first thing I always thought of was that it rhymed with “blistering”. Perhaps the party had gone too far up the mountain and the close proximity to the sun (as in the star: s-u-n) burned their faces and caused them to blister. But no, this is more of a cross between glittering and glistening: an indescribable brightness that no one on earth had ever seen before. In addition to Jesus, Moses and Elijah, both long dead, appear at the event. True to form, our old friend Peter has fallen asleep, but when he wakes up he realizes something big is occurring. Also true to form, Peter started speaking before he really started thinking, and suggested they make tents for their visitors. And who could blame him? He knew that was a sight he was privileged to see, and would not see anything like it again this side of heaven.

But I could not help but feel sorry for Peter because like him, I failed to grasp the importance of what was going on, and I was not even sure I understood why his suggestion was so plainly, at least in the opinion of the Evangelists, not a good one. When the Feast of the Transfiguration was chosen for the date on which I was to be ordained to the Sacred Priesthood, I decided I should probably investigate a little further and see what the big deal was.

Indeed it was a big deal. Thomas Aquinas referred to the Transfiguration as the “greatest miracle” because it revealed the hidden divinity of Christ before his passion and death. Likely I should have seen an encounter with the divine (or with an additional Divine) coming when the Evangelist told us that Christ was going up the mountain. Christian teaching over the centuries saw the setting on a mountain as the meeting of our human nature with God. In the Scriptures, mountains are often portrayed as the sacred place where

humans could meet God. Think of Moses on Mt. Sinai, Elijah on Mt. Horeb, or St. Francis on Mt. Laverna.

So the mountain indicated that a divine encounter was imminent. The Transfiguration provides further evidence that Jesus was the divine Son of God. It is not coincidental that this happened soon after Jesus had acknowledged Himself to be the Christ, the one who left Heaven's glory to come to earth. Now three of His disciples were to get a glimpse of that glory. The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus is highly significant. The name Moses was equated with the Old Testament law that God had given to the people. Jesus came and fulfilled the commandments of the law and did the things the law could not do, that is, to provide an answer for the problem of sin. The law pointed out the problem; Jesus gave the solution. To quote St. John in his first epistle general: "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

Elijah was an outstanding figure in the Old Testament. He was a great prophet and his appearance with Moses at the Transfiguration testified that Jesus fulfilled the prophets, as well as the law. But in case the endorsement of the Old Testament prophets was not enough, the voice of God the Father gave further confirmation of the calling and Sonship of Jesus. He acknowledged that Jesus had pleased Him in the things He had said and done. One cannot get much plainer than the declaration, "This is my beloved Son."

This encounter is near the end of Christ's public ministry. He goes through a change on that mountain, even if it is only physical and for a short time. The apostles are changed too, but in a spiritual and emotional way. Physical change is inevitable for us as we age. The French actor and singer Maurice Chevalier liked to say, "Old age isn't so bad when you consider the alternative." There is nothing we can do really to stop the aging process, although we certainly try. Age only

goes in one direction for us, but spiritual maturity can go in either direction. One could attend church for all of one's life and never make any spiritual progress. One could progress for years and years spiritually, stop, and then even start to go backward. Unlike age, we have to take an interest in our spiritual health. Spiritual health doesn't just happen to you. Undoubtedly you recognize that fact or you would not be sitting in an uncomfortable pew this morning while the golf course or the nearest river might be calling your name. But we have to work in order that the change in our spiritual lives is for the better.

After the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John find themselves alone with Jesus. They have been awed. They have been confused. They have been afraid. Now, they are alone with Christ, but they have been changed. Yet, the journey for the disciples continues. They walk with Christ. They eat with Christ. They are taught by Christ in the

Garden of Gethsemane, in the Upper Room, at the trial, as He carries the cross, and when He is resurrected.

We follow in the tradition of these disciples. We have our moments with God. We have our times when God is clear to us about the path. We have our moments when we see and feel the glory of God surround us. Every Sunday we are invited by God to come to His table. We are invited by God to partake of the heavenly banquet. We are called to come forward like Peter, James and John to be in the presence of Christ. Perhaps God is inviting us in order to help us see Christ's call on our life more clearly. Perhaps God is calling us to help us experience the miracle of the cross and the resurrection more deeply. Whatever the result there is one thing of which we can be assured: God always calls us to join in the journey, not just watch others travel past. God calls us to come and allow Him to mold us, to change us, for His glory. +In the Name...