



Feast of the Transfiguration

Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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When I was a young man studying for the priesthood, I remember being taught that when trying to understand, reflect on or pray with a passage from the Gospels, it is very important to have a look at what has come immediately before and what comes immediately after the particular passage you are considering.

I think this is especially important today, as we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord. The story of Jesus being transfigured, that is shown in all his glory as the Son of God, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, the two great prophets of the Jewish tradition, points us to the truth about who Jesus really is: the final and complete fulfillment of all God's promises to his Chosen People, to us as the new People of God formed into a communion of discipleship through our baptism, and in fact to the whole of humanity, for every single person who has ever lived or who will ever live is created by God in the divine image. We are all children of God, and therefore all brothers and sisters of Jesus, who reveals the face of God to us.

But as the prayer we will pray just before the Eucharistic Prayer reminds us, in God's mysterious plan, Jesus was transfigured in the presence of his closest disciples Peter, James and John, so that the scandal, the horror and degradation, of the cross might be removed from the hearts of the disciples. In other words, the disciples were given this extraordinary gift of seeing something of the divine glory of Jesus in order to strengthen them for the horrors of his arrest, his suffering and his shocking death.

This is why it is so important for us to remember that in the Gospel story as it unfolds this wonderful experience comes just a few days after a very painful encounter between Jesus and Peter. Jesus had asked his disciples what people were saying about him. Having given him a number of opinions which were being commonly spread around about Jesus by the crowds – that he was a great prophet, or perhaps even John the Baptist come back to life – the disciples were then asked by Jesus what they themselves believed about him. As usual it was Peter who spoke up on behalf of them all. *"You are the Christ"*, he said, *"the Son of the Living God"*. This was a wonderful expression of faith in Jesus and it was to be confirmed of course when Jesus was transfigured and the voice of God was heard from heaven, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him"*. When Peter made his great confession of faith Jesus congratulated him, reminding him that his faith was a gift of God given to him. But when Jesus went on to share with Peter and the others exactly what being the Christ would mean – that Jesus would have to suffer many things from the Jewish leaders of the time, and eventually be killed, and then rise again on the third day – Peter was horrified. *"This must not happen to you,"* he said to Jesus. Having just



congratulated Peter on his faith, Jesus now had to speak very strongly to him. *“Get behind me, Satan,”* he said. *“The way you think is not God’s way but a human way”.*

Peter loved Jesus, but he also loved his own strong views about what kind of messiah, or saviour, he and his people needed – and his view didn’t include betrayal, torture and death. Peter had to learn the hard way, as we all do, that our own instinctive ways of thinking, of judging, of evaluating are more often than not an expression of a human way of thinking rather than of God’s way of thinking. In the writings of the Prophet Isaiah which we use so often in the prayer of the Church we find God saying to us, *“My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways”* (Is 55:8). This is a hard lesson to learn, and a confronting truth to deal with. What it does do however is lead us back to the story of the Transfiguration which is at the heart of our celebration today. As the disciples grapple with the wonder, and the glory, and the awe of what they are experiencing, they hear the voice of God proclaiming Jesus as his beloved Son and then saying to those disciple, and to us, *“Listen to him”*.

This is how we discern whether or not our thoughts and our ways, our plans and our preferences, even our opinions and our prejudices, are in harmony with God’s plan for us or rather an expression of our own, often less worthy, desires.

To follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, as we in this archdiocese have committed ourselves to do, means listening carefully to Jesus and allowing ourselves to be guided by him. It will in one way or another lead us to the cross, where perhaps our own plans and desires will need to die in order for God’s plans to flourish in our lives, but the journey to the cross, for us as it was for Jesus, is also the journey to resurrection, to new life.

Saint Rose of Lima, a great saint who died in Peru in 1617 and whose feast day we will celebrate later this month, once said that the only ladder we can climb to get to heaven is in the shape of the cross. May our celebration of Mass today, strengthen us so that we can climb this ladder with hope, believing that it will lead us to life.