

## ***Homily for the Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord - Caz Thompson 14/08/2011***

### ***from Luke 9: beginning at verse 28***

I speak to you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

**Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.**

JK Rowling's success as an author is not just about the stories, or the films, or the hype, or the costumes or the celebrities, although this all helps. The reason she has sold so many books and their film rights is because you can read her stories from many places. She has the rare knack of being able to write to several audiences at once and on many levels at the same time.

Fiction is usually situated in a very tight genre, so that an author's work will appeal to adults or children, to girls or boys, to those who like sci-fi or those who like crime, and so on. JK Rowling, however, has managed to be many things to many people. Without wanting to labour the analogy, understanding the message behind the gospel reading today is very like this. We can say there are many ways to read it, and many ways to take away from it something that will improve our understanding of the way God works, and what God's intentions for us are.

For example, on a **scriptural** level, in order to confirm the word of God, those closest to Jesus are given the opportunity to see a vision of the glorified Messiah. We can also see the Transfiguration as a **metaphor** for the relationship between God and Jesus, their oneness as symbolised by the rays of light, and Jesus shining face.

As theologian William Neil says, there are several possibilities:

**Was this a hallucination, a misplaced story of a post-Resurrection appearance, or an actual event expressed in the only possible way open to devout Jews at that time?**

but decides firmly:

**Surely the last explanation is the only one that does justice to the narrative?**

Neil, like many theologians places Jesus, at this point in his ministry, before his Crucifixion and Resurrection, as being in a line of hugely important Jewish prophets who also deliver their people from life to death. With Jesus on Mount Tabor, the disciples also saw:

- Moses, who heard and saw God on Mount Sinai, and delivered the Jews out of Egypt and certain genocide; and
- Elijah who prophesied for God against the many heresies which threatened the Jews in the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, encountered God on Mount Horeb.

These encounters with God have common elements:

1. They often take place in mountains or beside trees
2. God's presence is often signified by a wind or breeze, a pillar of cloud, and earthquake or fire, or a strong fragrance or storms with thunder and lightning.
3. And they happen at times of extreme peril for the Jews

The Transfiguration we have described to us in the Gospels is the last of its kind, so it is important that it contains the elements which would signify to the Jews, a continuity, and a certainty that God was again in their midst and everything would now come right. It also however, marks the handover from the Old Testament appearances to God's self-revelation through Jesus.

So, our lesson from Luke's Gospel on this very special day, The Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, is one of the most powerful and mystical in all the New Testament,

but

it is also one of the most puzzling and mysterious.

I puzzled about how it actually was that day on Mount Tabor, and I also thought about the whole business of communicating with God; and I mean here how **we** communicate with God and how **God** communicates with us. One way to better understand it, I feel, is to think about our senses, but most particularly how they function for us as Christians. I am referring of course to smell, touch, sight, hearing, taste.

Scientists argue about the sixth sense, or "Extra Sensory Perception" and also about whether other senses such as nociception (pain), thermoception (temperature), magnetoception (direction), exist in their own right or only as sub-divisions of the others.

I don't want to get bogged down in all this, but I do think it is important to remember that on whatever level we understand God, or the world or each other, however clear or muddled it might be, all the information our brain processes, has reached us through some or all of our senses.

**In this life we are contained in our human bodies.** Everything we experience, including the love of God, the presence of God and the meaning of God in our lives, **happens in some part of our bodies.** As humans, we see, smell, hear, touch and taste each other. If this is true of how I communicate with you, and how you communicate with me, then this must also apply to the way we communicate with God?

Listen to the thoughts of Dallas Willard:

**“Spirituality in human beings is not an extra or “superior” mode of existence. It’s not a hidden stream of separate reality, a separate life running in parallel with our bodily existence ..... It is, rather, a relationship of our embodied selves to God that makes us alive to the Kingdom of God here and now in the material world.”**

In other words there is no 6<sup>th</sup> sense, no magical formula, no ritual or mystical incantation, we simply need what God has given us, what we were born with, our senses, our brains in other words our bodies, in order to experience God in our lives.

I want to turn again now to today's text and whatever we take away from these verses, I want us now to think about what must have been an incredible experience for Jesus and Peter, John and James also. The word used to describe seeing into the face of God or experiencing God via our senses, is called Theophany. Theophanies are recorded by humanity in all religions, including our own, as the most rare and incredible experience. It was also believed, and indeed often stated in the Old Testament, that you couldn't look into the face of God and live to speak of it. This means that those who did live to tell the story, assumed incredibly high status.

However, as I read this story over and over during the last few weeks, questions still kept coming to me, so I knew that I hadn't quite worked it through. But as I prayed I began to realise that God needs us as much as we need God. I know this because I believe that God created everything, not in the way the Creationists believe it in seven days, but rather because I believe that God is the first principle, the power of the great cosmos which surrounds us, and the power of the sub-atomic particles which comprise our very cells. **WE ARE ESSENTIAL TO GOD OTHERWISE WE WOULDN'T BE HERE.**

- But why does God seem to hide from us?
- Why don't we see God's face, or smell the fragrance of God, or hear the breath of God, or feel the breeze of God passing closely by?

There is a fable, that I've taken from a wonderful book by Margaret Silf, which I want to tell you because it has helped me so much to understand God' motive here:

**“There is a story of how, at the beginning of time, God decided to hide in the created universe, and so God summoned three angels to advise on a suitable hiding-place. The first angel suggested that God might hide in the depths of the earth. “A good idea” said God. “I will indeed hide myself in the earth, but it won’t be long before they learn to mine the earth, and they will surely find me too easily.**

**“Where else can I hide?” The second angel suggested the moon as a hiding place. “Excellent idea,” said God, “I will indeed hide myself in the expanses of space and the sun and the moon and stars, but it won’t be long before they discover how to explore space, and they will find me too soon. Where else can I hide”**

**So the third angel hit on a very original idea: “Why don’t you hide yourself in their own hearts? they’ll never think to look for you there!” And so God did all three things, hiding in the earth and all it contains; in the vastness of interstellar space; and in the innermost heart of every creature.**

And why does God need to hide at all? Why do we, like Jesus ascending Mount Tabor, need to search God out?

Because:

- it is in our search for God that we do our growing. We struggle to be good, we fail and fall and God picks us up, if only we ask.  
*This teaches us to care for our sisters and brothers, to properly love one another*
- it is in searching for God that we learn to pray and to communicate with God  
*This teaches us to be with each other in a deeper and more sincere way*
- it is in our searching that we learn who we are, and what God wants us to be  
*This teaches us that changes are good, that God’s guidance will never desert us*
- it is in searching for God that we realise God is inside us, our constant companion  
*This teaches us not to be afraid, in this life or to be afraid of death because our faith will bring us to God*

**There is an ancient Islamic confession that says:**

**Behind the human face God was hiding**

**I did not know,**

**I did not know.**

**I veiled my eyes and separated from the truth.**

Let us bow our heads and pray:

God be with each one of us as we struggle to be transfigured by your love for us, and your need for us. Help us to find the courage to begin to remove the veils from our own eyes as Jesus did on Mount Tabor, that we might ever after put our hand into yours and walk more closely with you. Amen

**IMMORTAL, INVISIBLE, GOD ONLY WISE.**

(Walter Chalmers Smith 1867)

**Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.**

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;  
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest to both great and small;  
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish but nought changeth thee.

**Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,  
Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;  
All laud we would render: O help us to see  
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.**

**The reredos panels behind the main altar are on the left as you face it, Moses and the burning bush, and on the right is the Transfiguration of Our Lord.**