

Transfiguration

In 2007 the London meeting of the Association of Interchurch Families preceded the 5th John Coventry Memorial Lecture. As he had done a number of times since the death of John Coventry, SJ, Fr Robert Murray SJ celebrated mass for the Association. Several of his homilies have appeared in the Interchurch Families journal, and later in IFIR (no.3, April 2005). The following homily was preached at Heythrop College of the University of London, where the meeting and lecture took place, on 17th February 2007.

Introduction

Once again I have the joy of leading your eucharistic worship today. The first time was in 1999, when I was invited to stand unworthily in the place of John Coventry. My last time was two years ago, to speak in loving memory of Martin Reardon. I am deeply grateful to be invited again.

We all realise that one reason for your Association to exist is the pain every couple among you feels, because your shared commitment to Christ is in tension with your commitment to separated Christian traditions. Between many denominations, thank God, there is mutual acceptance of eucharistic ministry. But you all know where the cause of pain mainly lies. This is why I find myself as a Catholic priest obliged in conscience to make a statement. Standing here as a representative, I cannot repudiate the discipline I am under by offering a general invitation. Indeed, I accept the Catholic principle that eucharistic mutuality ought to be in step with mutual recognition between churches. But I am equally convinced that interchurch marriages and families are in a special position and that this deserves to be recognised; and in conscience I cannot go against what I believe Jesus desires. Many of you have heard before how I solve this. I invite each of you to exercise your own spiritual discernment. I cannot turn away anyone who comes for love of Jesus, to receive his body and blood. If anyone would rather come simply for a blessing, please do so; or stay in your place and pray, if you prefer. I greet you all in Christ and welcome you all in him.

Hebrews 11: 1-7

Mark 9: 1-13

Are you wondering why I chose the readings you have just heard, to bring you a message for your meeting? What have the letter to the Hebrews and the Transfiguration of the Lord to do with your lives as partners in interchurch marriages? Well, I didn't go straight for those two texts. I prefer to accept, if possible, the lectionary readings for the day. This may sometimes create challenges, but it can also open up vistas I hadn't thought of before.

Regiments in the parade

The letter to the Hebrews is addressed to Jews who want to follow Jesus as Christ yet cannot believe he is divine as well as human, God's eternal Son. The first thing the writer has to put right is a compromise idea, that Jesus was actually some kind of angel. Again and again the readers are warned that if they cannot develop their faith so as to believe in Christ's full divinity, they will find they have 'missed the bus'. Hebrews is a long letter, and our passage today is the beginning of the conclusion. After all the warnings, the writer wants to encourage his readers; he

recognises that they do want to follow Jesus, and that they have some degree of faith in him. So he builds on that. As this long chapter develops, it becomes clear that by faith he means more than purely intellectual belief: that is only one part of a full response to God. It includes personal true-ness, commitment – what Jewish tradition calls ‘cleaving to God’. The opening statement is filled out by surveying the parade of saints who lived and died with this committed faith in all the centuries before Christ. I hope you’ll go home and remind yourselves of the whole chapter. Finally the writer comes to his climax, which begins the next chapter: we have seen a great ‘cloud of witnesses’; now we must look to Jesus as the one who was really leading the procession all the time, and who still calls us today. In fact that ‘Today’ has sounded repeatedly in an earlier chapter. But now it’s for us, here, now and from now on, to live by and witness to. We are members of that great parade. Our witness to our faith in Jesus puts us among the saints. There are various regiments in the parade; yours is the A.I.F.

On the holy mountain

Now let us look at the story of the Transfiguration as we have heard it in the Gospel of Mark. It is told also by Matthew and by Luke, who adds some precious details, and there is a vivid allusion in the second letter of Peter. This event in the short public life of Jesus is central to his efforts to get across to his disciples that he is indeed the expected Messiah, the Lord’s Anointed, but that this does not mean a political figure who will restore the kingdom of David.

Jesus had chosen twelve men in whom he saw real promise. Among them he must have seen a deeper quality in Peter, James and John. He chose them to experience a revelation of his hidden divine glory, so that they might be able to take in what he was trying to tell them about his destined death and resurrection, and not lose faith.

None of the gospels names the high mountain ‘where they could be alone’. This is unusual, for all four almost regularly tell us where each event they narrate took place. Tradition has come to identify the place as Mount Tabor, but is Tabor really high enough to fit the description? – and remote enough to offer privacy when all in Galilee were looking for Jesus? Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke simply says that Jesus went up a mountain to pray. Later on Luke alone records how Jesus prayed where he had withdrawn from Galilee with his disciples, to test how far they had got in understanding, but only Matthew and Mark name Caesarea Philippi as the place.

Biblical scholars in recent centuries have been too much obsessed with trying to establish facts and dates, and to identify locations. The fathers of the Church believed, no doubt, that everything narrated in the Bible actually happened, but they were more interested in spiritual meanings. For the listeners to the first preachers of the Gospel, what mountain could evoke, together, the names of Moses and Elijah? Wherever this event actually took place, symbolically and ‘spiritually’ it irresistibly points us to Mount Horeb (the other name of Sinai). This was where God delivered the Torah to Moses. It was where centuries later Elijah, a fugitive from Jezebel’s rage, heard the ‘still small voice’ revealing to him that he was by no means the last surviving true believer in God, and that the time was due for him to hand over his prophetic status to Elisha. And if the mountain to which Jesus had led his chosen three could become for them the spiritual, symbolic Horeb, may not each of us treasure some place, some time, in which we experienced a sense of God’s reality that could turn that place into our own spiritual Horeb?

What was it that the three disciples experienced? Again, Luke tells more than Matthew and Mark. All three say that Jesus was ‘transfigured’, changed in appearance. Matthew says his face shone like the sun; all try to describe this amazing light of Jesus which made even his clothes shine brilliantly – in fact Mark has more to say about this than about Jesus himself! Then all

three mention the appearance of the two figures, talking with Jesus; the disciples seem able to recognise them at once as Moses and Elijah. Luke alone tells us what they were talking about: the 'exodus' (clearly meaning death) that Jesus was to fulfil in Jerusalem. But what were the disciples experiencing? Again, it is only Luke, and only now, who gives us hints to help us to picture this. Luke says they were heavy with sleep, yet he adds at once that they kept awake all the time. The mention of sleepiness could suggest that the experience was a shared dream; but the firm statement that they kept awake challenges us to choose between physical sight and hearing, or a shared visionary experience. I don't believe that to choose the latter is necessarily a surrender to disbelief that anything really happened. Faith bids us believe that the whole event was planned by God. Jesus was to prove his divine nature for these special disciples in a way answering to their idea of God's glory. Thus he would create a vision of the biblical representatives of Torah and prophecy to attest that Jesus was fulfilling God's promises of the supreme 'Lord's Anointed' to come, and of how his death was to lead to the triumph of God's plan. Finally a cloud (Matthew says luminous) obscured the whole vision, but from it the disciples heard God's voice confirming Jesus' divine sonship, as previously at his baptism. Peter was beside himself, and started babbling; 'He did not know what he was saying'. If only this precious moment could last! His self-image demanded practical action, of course with Peter in charge. But the vision was already fading, and for the disciples there was just their beloved friend and teacher alone, reaching out his sturdy hand to raise them up.

An eternal meaning

The event of the Transfiguration was over, but its meaning is eternal. I have already suggested that Christians, including you and me, may remember experiences which, in prayerful meditation, we can see as moments on our own Horeb or Tabor, moments when we knew Jesus was reassuring us. It is my prayer for you, precisely in your lives as interchurch couples and parents, that you may be strengthened by such moments and memories. I pray that your very witness to what you are may be for others a sign of the reality of Jesus and a promise of the complete unity of all Christians in one Church.

Robert Murray, SJ

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