

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

21st February 2016

“Jesus taketh unto him Peter and James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart: And he was transfigured before them.”

– *St. Matthew 17:1-2.*



On the 6th of August the Church celebrates the great feast of the Lord's Transfiguration – a feast, incidentally, which holds a special place in my heart, since it was the day of my first Mass. Today, on this second Sunday of Lent, the Church also asks us to contemplate the Lord's Transfiguration, when in the presence of his closest Apostles Peter, James and John, he allowed his glory to shine forth briefly through the veil of his flesh.

You might think it is strange to have this Gospel during Lent – a time when, surely, we should be contemplating the patience and suffering of Christ – but if we look closely there are several reasons that the Church in her wisdom gives us this Gospel today. You will notice that the Lord, within the cloud of his glory, is speaking to Moses and Elijah, the two Old Testament figures who sum up in their persons “the law and the prophets” (*cf.* St. Luke 16:16; St. Matthew 22:40, *etc.*). The other day, on Ember Friday, the liturgy explained the connection when it reminded us, “Moses fasted forty days; Elias did the same; and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ himself fulfilled a like number in his own holy fast. As soon as we hear these three mentioned together, we think of certain things for which they stand: Moses for the Law, Elias for the Prophets, Christ for the Gospel; even as on the Mount of the Transfiguration, these three appeared together” (Matins, 1st lesson). So in the midst of our forty-day Lenten fast the liturgy reminds us of the fast of these holy men of old.

Moreover, the time has now come when “all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses and in the prophets ... concerning me” (St. Luke 24:44), as Christ said to the disciples after his Resurrection. The Father's voice sounds forth from the cloud to confirm that the promises have now been fulfilled. Moses in the Old Testament had promised that in the time of the Messiah, “the Lord thy God will raise up to thee a prophet of thy nation and of thy brethren like unto me: *him thou shalt hear*” (Deuteronomy 18:15), and now the Father announces, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: *hear ye him*” (St. Matthew 17:5).

There is another significant point as well: St. Luke, in his account of the Transfiguration, adds that with Our Lord, Moses and Elijah “spoke of his

decease that he should accomplish in Jerusalem” (St. Luke 9:31). He was announcing to them that he was soon to endure his Passion: only in this way could the gates of heaven be opened. And this brings us to Peter, John and James: why were *these* three Apostles present to witness this most singular miracle? Of the college of Apostles, they formed a privileged inner circle, but more than that, the Transfiguration – the sight for a few fleeting moments of the glory of Christ’s soul shining forth through his human body – the Transfiguration was for them a consolation given to prepare them for the trauma that in a short time was to push their faith perhaps to its breaking point. For these three Apostles soon thereafter were the witnesses of another transfiguration: not this time a transfiguration of light on Mount Thabor but a transfiguration of blood in the Garden of Gethsemani. It was Peter, James and John who were present to see the Saviour’s appearance transformed by the sweat of blood.

In our own spiritual lives, too, the Lord in his mercy sometimes shows us a Transfiguration before inviting us to accompany him on his Agony in the Garden. In the early days that follow a new convert’s reception into the Church, in the happy time after a pardoned sinner leaves the confessional; in the halcyon first months of a marriage, in the happy early days of a vocation after a young person enters the seminary or convent, the Lord often will send special consolations. Prayer seems easier and sweeter; there is much enthusiasm for God’s glory and generosity in the service of others. But what Our Saviour desires more than anything is to draw us closer to him: the consolations he sometimes sends are a means to give us a taste for the spiritual life; they are not an end in themselves. Our love must be purified and we must learn to attach ourselves not to the consolations of God, but to the God of consolations. St. Francis de Sales reminds us: “devotion does not consist in conscious sweetness and tender consolations, which move one to sighs and tears, and bring about a kind of agreeable, acceptable sense of self-satisfaction ... true solid devotion consists in a firm, resolute, ready, active will, prepared to do whatsoever is acceptable to God” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, IV, 13). In the midst of consolations we are tempted like St. Peter to want to build a tent, to stay put where things are comfortable, but like him we know not what we are saying, because we want to bypass the cross.

This Lent is a time for us to give thanks to the Saviour for the special favours and consolations he may have given us and to be courageous enough to accompany him also when he goes up to be crucified: to love him when he purifies us and not only when he comforts us. A special effort we can make this Lent is to practice the spiritual works of mercy of forgiving injuries and bearing patiently with the inconveniences we experience, for the mortifications which we do not choose for ourselves – but which providence sends – are always even better than the ones we have chosen for ourselves.