

Feast of the Transfiguration

Because of the calendar this year with August 6 falling on a Sunday, the celebration of the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time is displaced – You might say Ordinary Time is suspended – so we can celebrate instead the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord. The vestments are white not green.

Among Holy Land and Scripture experts there is some dispute as to where the Transfiguration took place. Many scholars today opt for Mount Hermon – the highest mountain in the Holy Land, located near Caesarea Philippi. However older tradition places this event on the top of Mount Tabor, west of the Sea of Galilee.

When Dinah and I were blessed to be part of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2006, on our first full day there, we traveled on a rickety old bus along a narrow road up to the fog covered top of Mount Tabor.

There stands the beautiful Franciscan Church of the Transfiguration, where you can see ruins of an earlier 10th century church built by the Crusaders, and even an older 3rd century structure.

Moses and Elijah are honored, not with tents, but in two beautiful chapels on either side of the main worship area. Ancient hand-painted mosaics are everywhere.

But this Feast Day must be about more than a very old church built to commemorate an event 2000 years ago.

All three of our readings today point us toward the person of Jesus Christ – The one empowered and sent to us by the Father.

Our faith in Jesus as the Son of God is the reason that we gather in this sacred place to both celebrate and to anticipate the coming of Christ into our world.

The Transfiguration takes place at the height of Jesus' public ministry. He is on the way to Jerusalem, where his redemptive sacrifice would be fulfilled.

Many in the crowds did not understand this.

They were still expecting a Messiah, who exercising fearsome majesty, would liberate them from Roman occupation. Even his own Apostles were confused and uncertain about where Jesus was leading them.

Jesus chooses Peter, James, and John and gives to them a foretaste of his glory, which will happen after his resurrection. It is a way of helping them to believe and to encourage them and strengthen them for the trying path ahead, the road to the cross.

This wonderful Gospel story should inspire us as well

On a high mountain, immersed in prayer, Jesus is transfigured before them: his face, his entire person radiates a blinding light.

The Father's voice sounds from above, as it had at his baptism: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

This Feast Day reminds us that when God calls us he is not asking us to embrace an idea or a philosophy; we are being asked to follow, to give ourselves over to a person.

If you have ever surrendered yourself to a person - for example your husband or wife – you know that the discovery of where you are going is also a discovery of the person who is traveling with you.

God's unmistakable call to each one of us is to encounter and to discover, and to journey with Jesus Christ.

It is on that mountain top that the disciples discovered a lot about the person they were traveling with.

Peter, James, and John were given a preview of the glory of the risen Christ – that he was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets and of for us, of Daniel's vision of the of the Ancient One, handing over to the Son of Man all peoples, nations, and languages - God the Father entrusting the world to the care of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in all his dazzling heavenly glory, but had no idea what it would cost him to reach those heights. The road to glory always passes through pain and shame.

But it is not enough to see a great vision. You have to listen and respond.

The transformation that took place on that mountain is a call for us to transform our lives.

If we want to share in Jesus' glory, we must be prepared to participate in his suffering. It is about losing our life for Him.

Perhaps we sometimes say to ourselves – I know I do - that if we only saw something like the Transfiguration, then faith would be easy. But we know that this was not the case with the apostles. No matter what we see or experience in this life, faith is always an act of trust.

The Transfiguration is thus a feast of faith in Jesus as the Christ. It celebrates who Jesus is as God's Son, even as it proclaims God's plan for all of humanity.

For on the way down the mountain, Jesus tells the three once again that the Son of Man must suffer.

Jesus must return to the valley to attend to all the needs of the world. The disciples also cannot remain on the mountaintop. They, too, must follow Jesus and help in his work of healing and comfort to those who need him.

We all yearn for the mountain top, exceptional life experiences which bring us strength, hope and love. It is not wrong to wish for such experiences, but it is unrealistic to feel that all of our lives should be lived on the mountaintop.

The life of discipleship means we must descend into the valley where most of life occurs, to help and to heal.

The Word Among Us Press published a wonderful collection of Pope Francis' meditations on the Gospels. In meditating on this Gospel the Pope says that with Peter, James, and John, we too, climb the Mount of the Transfiguration. That we too stop and contemplate the face of Jesus, and that we must receive his message and translate it into our own lives.

Pope Francis says simply - that the message is Love – We can be transfigured/transformed only by Love.

Our 2nd Reading today concludes by asking us to be attentive to God's Word in our life, for it is like a lamp shining in a dark place, guiding us on our journey, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.