

Sermon by Fr. Geoffrey Neal
St. Nicolas Church, August 6th 2017
Sunday of the Transfiguration

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Dear friends of the Church, it has been a joy to share this weekend together and to conclude with this great feast day of the Transfiguration. May I speak in the name of God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit!

Today I would like to use words from the second reading from St Peter, TAKE HEED OF THE LIGHT THAT SHINES IN A DARK PLACE [2 Peter 19] reflecting, upon the importance it must have for our enterprise as members of the Nordic Catholic Churches.

My first personal encounter with the mystery of the Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ was in my seminary chapel. My allocated place was in front of a large copy of the Andrei Rublev Icon. I must have spent hours looking at the radiant figure of Jesus in shining white with the two OT figures on either side of him, and below, Peter James and John in a state of confusion.

Some years later I read that Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger described the dazzling image of Jesus on the mountain as *“A prayer event in which drawing to God means, becoming one with the pure light of Christ’s divinity”*.

As part of my own preparation for today I also read from a Transfiguration homily by the great preacher St John Chrysostom (always a good starting point for novices like me) and he wrote *“this is where we who*

seek to live and see the Spirit, glimpse the divine nature”.

We are looking at a prayer event for seekers of the divine nature. The transfiguration is not only a prayer event because Jesus again goes to a mountain to pray, but because the disciples are in the presence of the most intense mystical communion between Jesus and the Father before he enters the final dénouement of his ministry. Here the fullness of the Triune God is revealed, the heart of who Jesus Christ is and also the heart of the journey of all Christian pilgrims.

This it seems to me the essence for us today for it underlines the central importance of this gospel event. We are, like the first disciples often wrestle with our predicament, struggling to glimpse the divine nature with which we yearn to be part of, but we are all aware that the light of Christ finds itself in a very dark world - another kind of Dark Age.

Bishop Roald must have had this in mind, when in his pre-conference notes he wrote *“in our present culture, religion is essentially understood as a way of providing therapeutic benefits for individuals. We must reshape a vision of church life that encourages the believer to nourish his faith and to grow in holiness.... it is a challenge of first importance to assert what it means to live in the church as the body of Christ.”*

The dazzling light that shone in the figure of Christ on the mount of Transfiguration was of course the light of the Resurrection, the light we carry at Pascha and that we all receive at our baptism when we are called to shine as a light in the world.

Radiating this light is not impossible!

Some have already achieved some part of this radiance. For example, the Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill who in great frailty shortly before her death in 1941 was said by her pastors to have become *“transparent her face like alabaster, but with light behind it....a kind of Transfiguration.”* There are others within wider Christendom, St Seraphim of Sarov, St Catherine of Sienna and St John Vianney and I believe Mother Theresa of Calcutta, in whose lives the light of the resurrection could already be seen.

But for most of us we are more like the disciples at the base of the Rubelev Icon, the struggle for a mystical life of devotion is difficult enough and our task in the West is made even more difficult by the present political culture.

We in England are in a particularly bad place. I have been reading the English writer T.S. Eliot who in 1939 described the English *“as no longer Christian and no longer regulated by Christian values”*. Eighty years later our political and religious leaders have happily absorbed all the politically correct attitudes and are leading the people into all the relativist attitudes available to them, so that the radiance of the Holy Mountain can no longer penetrate their minds.

Holiness has become a devalued commodity. It was Alexander Solzhenitzyn who after his eleven years in prison was exiled in the 1970's from the Soviet Union. Living in the West he noted the effects of a near vacuum in the spiritual and moral dimension of Westerners, including churchgoing Christians. He described the *“destruction of the soul”*.

I believe this is exactly right; our dark age is threatening the destruction of the human soul, and we cannot tolerate such a catastrophe.

Talking with neighbours and members of nearby Churches about all this, I realized they thought I was mad to think the souls of their fellow Christians was in any way threatened, they were all very good and spiritual people although admitting that most thought the Trinity was for professionals like me.

There is no doubt that we have a hard sell on all fronts including the revelation that took place on the mount of Transfiguration..

We are gathered for business but must remember that **HOWEVER MUCH WE EMBRACE THE RIGHT THEOLOGICAL MIND OR EVEN THE RIGHT STRUCTURES, THESE BY THEMSELVES ARE NOT THE ULTIMATE GOALS OF OUR MINISTRY.**

The main task is, acquiring holiness (using the good greek word theosis) for ourselves and our people. *“Be Holy as your father in Heaven is Holy”*, said the Apostle Peter to his newly baptized converts and that is our task, everything else serves this and the transfiguration underlines it.

All our people must know how urgent the situation is and how important for their **INNER LIFE OF HOLINESS** is and how vital to return to the mind of the Fathers of the **PHILOKALIA**. Knowing how important it is to love the good and the beautiful for the building of the soul in the image of the God who was revealed on the mountain and no other God invented by the human mind.

In these days we can be pretty sure that many good and nice fellow Christians are in fact Unitarians and see no relevance in the revealing of the Blessed Trinity. This is apparent in much public prayer and worship which bears all the signs of what may be called pseudo christianity, *“a feel good, sentimental religion most suited to the consumerist and individualistic world”*. The God of the Catholic faith we hold and worship, is Trinitarian and this is where our prayer begins, as the Athanasian Creed bluntly puts it: *without which man cannot be saved. Or as we might go on to say without which our souls will be lost*. What begins with Pseudo doctrine results in the death of the soul, with the result in shocking words of St Gregory of Nyssa: *“If a Christian face is not clothed with the light of the Holy Spirit it will become the bearer of the mask of the demon”*.

We must use every effort to teach the way of the Fathers that they called THEOSIS. St Gregory of Palamas, in his homily says that the Transfiguration is there to remind us, what it really *“means to draw near to God with the prayer that reveals the glory and light of the divinity, the fruit of mental union with God which causes his radiance to shine in us”*.

This is the testimony of the eyewitnesses and not devised fables as the Apostles frequently declare. Here is the importance of the Transfiguration and it highlights the deficit at the deepest level within the lives of so many Churches.

As we conclude this conference in the radiance of the TRANSFIGURATION praying that the Holy Spirit will *open the gates of Holiness*.

I end with the words of the hymn sung at our Ordinations in England last September:

*Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire
and lighten with celestial fire,
thou the anointing Spirit art
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.*

*Thy blessed unction fro above
is comfort life and fire of love
Enable with perpetual light
the dullness of our blinded sight.*

Praise to thy eternal merit Father Son and Holy Spirit.
AMEN.