

St German's Cathedral 27 Feb 2022 10.30am

Exodus 34. 29-end

Luke 9: 28-36

*While he [Peter] was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified...* Luke 9: 34



May my words and your hearing be in the hands of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

The story of the Transfiguration is associated with a Feast of that name which is celebrated on 6<sup>th</sup> August and particularly important in the Orthodox tradition. It is also the day when for the first time the world exploded an atom bomb at Hiroshima which together with the bomb dropped on Nagasaki three days later effectively brought to end World War II and has given us, for the most part peace in Europe since.

I say for the most part, in that we have had the terrible atrocities associated with the break-up of the old Yugoslavia, something I witnessed from the safe distance of being within earshot of gun fire as I visited the Marian shrine of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war, and we have had, of course, smaller battles to deal with such as those euphemistically called 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland.

Now we have another shock as we share the Gospel of the Transfiguration with war again appearing in Europe.

Today we experience the contrast of light – the dazzling radiance of God and the blinding light of the night sky being lit by bombs.

The light of God is once again in stark contrast with the light of evil.

So let's look at the Transfiguration and reflect on it in the light of the people of the Ukraine by looking at three elements:

- The presence of Moses and Elijah
- The scene foreshadowing the crucifixion and resurrection

- The mountain top experience contrasting with that of the valley below.

### **First the presence of Moses and Elijah**

In the dazzling vision on the mountain, seen by his intimate disciples, Peter, James and John, the reality of who Christ is becomes visible.

Jesus, accompanied by Moses and Elijah, portrays Jesus as fulfilling the promise of the **law** (represented by Moses) and the **prophets** (represented by Elijah). Both of these figures also had mountain top experiences – Moses on Sinai and Elijah on Mount Horeb. The scene points to Jesus as the long-expected Messiah of the Jewish people. Luke leaves us in no doubt about this as he has the voice pronouncing from the cloud '*This is my Son, the Chosen; listen to him!*' (Luke 9: 35).

Just to push the image of Moses as lawgiver and Elijah as prophet a little further and Jesus fulfilling both. In terms of the law, Jesus in this Gospel elicits this response from a lawyer:

*'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.'* Luke 11.27

Jesus was delighted with the lawyers answer, which sums up the law of Moses, but the lawyer pushes Jesus further asking him who is my neighbour and then we get the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37)

The prophetic ministry (symbolised by Elijah) is able to point to the rottenness in society – he was described as the 'scourge of Israel' (1 Kings 18.17) – you recall that Elijah challenged the followers of Queen Jezebel on Mount Carmel, then gaining victory over them fled to Horeb, where he encountered God not in the noise of a hurricane, not in the shaking of an earthquake nor fire, but in the sound of silence. (1 Kings 19. 9-14)

- The people of the Ukraine are our 'neighbour', so are the people of Russia
- The rottenness of society needs to be exposed wherever it is, be it Putin's Russia or the Isle of Man.

We live in an age where there is so much false news – something that Putin does not have a monopoly on. We only have to recall Trump and indeed our own Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

## **Second the transfigurations foreshadows the Crucifixion and resurrection**

Deep in the story of the transfiguration is a reference to the cross.

Luke makes reference to Jesus' *'departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem'* (Luke 9:31). The Transfiguration while pointing to the cross, however also points beyond it to the resurrection which follows.

Cross (death) and resurrection are intimately a part of our Christian life.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears fruit some 100/60/30/fold. (Matthew 13.8)

The Transfiguration challenges us to sacrificial service. Does our own life reflect this? What are we prepared to give up in order that life may flourish? So much of the west is dependent on Russian Gas – I think in Germany it is something like 40%? The west is trying to implement sanctions against Russia and our governments are probably trying to

work out how to do it and minimise the sacrifice of its citizens. If we stand alongside the people of the Ukraine, we must be prepared to make sacrifices, which affect our own standard of living.

We need to stand in solidarity with the people of the Ukraine, a country which is 72% Christian, largely Ukrainian Orthodox paying with their lives. Refusing to be a doormat to a bullying neighbour.

## **The mountain top experience contrasting with that of the valley below.**

Peter clearly wants to hang on to the Transfiguration scene - wouldn't we all want to remain in a place of wonder rather than face the realities of life! Peter when he says

*'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah' v33*

is in effect saying we want to not only mark this occasion, but also hold on to it. But Peter has to let go and travel back down the mountain where trouble awaits in the rough and tumble of life below.

The trouble that met the disciples at the bottom of the mountain was the sick child that the disciples could not heal (Luke 9.37-42).

Are we wanting a religion of comfort, where we can stay at the top of the mountain hanging on to it like Peter?

Are we wanting the comforts of life that we enjoy in the west?

or will we rise to the challenge, get our hands dirty, and get embroiled in life that we might be a people transfigured and catalysts (as disciples of Jesus) in transfiguring others.

This requires us:

- To love and speak out prophetically
- To offer our lives sacrificially
- To retain the vision of the mountain top, but get stuck into life in all its messiness

Finally, I have a tiny icon that has come from Kyiv it portrays, Mary, 'Theotokos' in the Greek, 'God-bearer' or 'Mother of God' (as we translate it) with her son, a baby, yet fully adult in proportions, who blesses. It was given to me by Katherine one of my students who was subsequently ordained and who was the

wife of the British Ambassador to the Ukraine in Kyiv.

I am going to leave it on the Altar for as long as war continues in the Ukraine, as a symbol of our prayer, that the dazzling light of Christ may overcome the shocking blinding light of evil and war.

I would also, as a kind of post-script to my sermon, remind you that we have a garden set aside in the Cathedral grounds (part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Knockaloe Internment Garden), which amongst other things commemorates four genocides each told through fables – one being the Ukrainian Holodomor Forced Famine of 1932-33 when 7 million people died at the hands of Stalin. The genocide is told through the fable of Kotyhoroshko which comes from the Kyiv cycle which was banned by The Soviet Union, as they tried to stamp out Ukrainian folk traditions.

In the silence let us pray for the people of the Ukraine and Russia.

