

HOMILY BY FR. SIMON CADWALLADER

Second Sunday of Lent, 17th March, 2019

Do we see things as they are . . . or as we are? Lillian and Jay are characters in a novel who both paint the same scene of the River Seine in France. “Lillian was bewildered by the enormous discrepancy which existed between what Jay painted and what she had painted. Together they would walk along the same Seine river . . . she would see it silky grey, sinuous and glittering . . . he would draw it opaque with fermented mud, and a shoal of wine bottle corks and weeds caught in the stagnant edges.” The author is making the point that we see the world not as it is . . . but through our own imperfect lenses, moulded by the individual peculiarities of our minds. St. Paul says much the same thing. We humans, he insists, see through a glass darkly, for we have an incomplete, inexact, obscure vision of reality . . . we see things not as they are but as we are. Now for God to clean the lens and move each of us beyond our preconceived notions and partial understandings . . . all of which arise from our own individual positive and negative experiences . . . that is the work of transfiguration. Transfiguration simply means a change or metamorphosis into a more spiritual, and therefore beautiful, state of being.

In the amazing Transfiguration narrative, three disciples, up on Mount Tabor, get just a glimpse of the dazzling brilliance of who Jesus really is . . . his divine majesty and glory . . . and they are blown away by the experience . . . eventually stunned into silence . . . it was something way beyond their present powers of comprehension. The understanding of godly things rarely comes quickly; recall how Jesus called his own disciples “dull”, slow learners. When trying to teach them about servant leadership, he finds them squabbling about who deserves the most favoured position. They don’t listen attentively enough to Jesus . . . they listen to themselves and therefore see life from their own perspective not His. We know how easy it is to fall into that trap. So listen now to the wise advice of God the Father in the Gospel . . . This is my Son . . . listen to him!! . . . in other words . . . He is my voice, my mouthpiece . . . so I ask you to put aside your own ideas . . . and actively and consciously listen to Him . . . more attentively than to anyone else . . . it will transform you.

The Gospel teaches us that Jesus is transfigured while he is at prayer . . . and in his own personal prayer, he listens more than he speaks. This is a key message to us . . . when, in our prayer, we listen more than we talk, we are changed, illuminated . . . we begin to see more clearly. Jesus shows us how. He divests himself of his own thoughts to absorb what the Father is saying . . . he listens patiently and deeply so as to see more clearly what he should do next. And just as he listens intently to the Father, so the Father tells us to tune into all that Jesus says through scripture and in our personal prayer . . . then we'll begin to see things in a new light.

So how do we hear Jesus more clearly? Good listening is full of effort. Recall how the disciples had to struggle up a mountain before they saw the spectacular "light show" at the top . . . their arduous climb symbolizes that our golden moments of illumination in prayer arise through disciplined effort. To pray, you must choose to set aside time for God over other projects competing for your attention . . . then sit and stay there . . . even when you are tempted to get up and do something else. That takes effort. Through Jeremiah, God said "you will find Me only when you search for Me with all your heart." We are saying to God . . . I love you . . . speak, Lord your servant is listening. Next step is to slow down and gradually tune in . . . it's like carefully searching for one radio station among many other frequencies . . . and when you are distracted, as you will be, keep coming back into focus. When God spoke to Elijah it was in a "still small voice" . . . so God's way of communicating with us is subtle . . . that's why listening in prayer comes only through constant practice. It's about waiting patiently and creating space for some distinct fruitful thought to settle in your mind . . . your way of thinking is gradually transfigured.

Up on the mountain, Peter, James and John are exhilarated and at the same time they're shaken out of their preconceptions into a new reality they would need time to grasp fully. They had what we call a "numinous experience" . . . a "wow" feeling . . . of awe and wonder in the presence of the transcendent God . . . an awareness of human nothingness when faced with what is truly holy and powerful. A fantastic, wonderful feeling! You too, no doubt, have had experiences . . . your "wow" moments. Maybe the day you fell in love . . . your Wedding . . . the birth of a child . . . or some red letter days . . . happenings that

so touched your life that they've never left you and have marked your path going forward. These are the dots which connect your life story and give you a glimpse of a deeper reality . . . something radiant and beyond the norm . . . something that changes you.

Fr. Jimmy Collins was a good friend of mine . . . he died a few years ago in his nineties. As he matured in the spiritual life he discerned the need for a different kind of prayer . . . very few words . . . just listening in the dark and in the silence . . . for the light of wisdom to illuminate his mind and swell his heart. It meant being more open to seeing himself through the clear eyes of Jesus rather than as others saw him, or even as he saw himself . . . so allowing a slow transfiguration to occur, making him more sensitive to the guidance and insight of the Holy Spirit. When he was 80, he decided to walk alone to Walsingham in thanksgiving to the Blessed Virgin for taking care of him over so many years. In his autobiography, he goes on to describe what you might call a transfiguring lesson . . . Fr. Jimmy was a diminutive man, having inherited a gene of dwarfism . . . he describes how as a young man, boys and girls would openly comment saying, "look at that tiny man, daddy" . . . he said it was good for his humility but that it bothered him. Now an elderly man and quietly praying away as he was walking to the Slipper Chapel in Walsingham . . . he writes: "I had this extraordinary sense of being chosen by God, and that my body had been made beautiful by God and no amount of human testimony could change what God had made beautiful. Working from the bottom up I began to thank God . . . to say how beautiful my feet were, then my legs . . . my chest. I thanked God for all my organs . . . for my face and my head . . . from that moment I lost all sense of being handicapped in any way whatsoever. I was simply grateful for the beauty of the human body that God had given to me and to everybody else, but particularly to me because I was handicapped. This is a grace that has never left me since that day . . . a great gift.

Fr. Jimmy's insight directs us in our Lenten journey into the silence and to practice it with renewed dedication. It is in silence that Jesus speaks to souls. Those who flee silence will struggle to ever hear his voice. In silence the Holy Spirit descends and works in souls bringing them to the perfection Jesus desires for each one. In our fast-paced culture, it is not easy to still our thoughts and let them die out before God . . . but prolonged periods of

intentional silence, letting feelings go, will bring you to a higher level of understanding and a deeper insight into the greater riches of life.

We, of course, are part of a “transfiguration” in every Mass . . . the bread and wine we offer on the altar become “transfigured” or transformed (transubstantiated) into the living Body and Blood of the crucified, risen, and glorified Jesus. The glory of the Lord descends in our midst. Just as Jesus’ Transfiguration was meant to strengthen the Apostles for their later trials, each Mass in which we participate fully, actively, and consciously changes us. The Eucharistic Jesus becomes our Heavenly, “divine energy food” to sustain our ongoing journey and give us vital strength against the temptations which afflict us.

The Holy Spirit has driven us, like Jesus, into the desert for our renewal . . . and on this second Sunday of Lent, we are meant to take encouragement from the Transfiguration story. The Lord descends the mountain into the darkest valley of suffering but we are invited to keep our hopes high, to remember the mountain top glory in our darker moments. Recall what St. Paul preaches tonight . . . this is not our homeland . . . we shouldn’t get too caught up and preoccupied with earthly matters. Pau lifts our minds and says . . . from Heaven the Saviour will come, the Lord Jesus, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of own glorified body. Now that’s a thought worth holding on to”!

Don’t we all long for a body without limitations . . . from 25 onwards, gravity begins to announce she is not your friend and your body gradually begins to lose power . . . the ageing process. But St. Paul moves us on to consider our future glorified bodies. We will be recognizable but not the same . . . just as the caterpillar cramped in the cocoon emerges altogether more powerful and beautiful as a butterfly . . . so your body will be transfigured . . . lifted up to the heights of new powers . . . it will never change or diminish. You know when you haven’t seen someone for a long time . . . you look at how they’ve changed and think . . . what happened? . . . forgetting that they are looking at you thinking the same thing. But in Heaven your body will be agile, able to accomplish whatever you want at the speed of thought . . . no need to get on a

plane for 5 hours to get to where you want to go to . . . your new body will be utterly submissive to your soul's desires. Finally, as in the transfiguration account, your glorified body will have a certain luminosity . . . a mystical clarity, which St. Thomas Aquinas says, will result from the overflow of the soul's glory into the body. So, if to you Lent symbolizes the long slog through the difficulties of life, take encouragement as you consider the glorious transfiguration towards which all of us are moving.

In the meantime, let's not be too quick to want to escape our 40 day desert experience and recognise that little transfigurations can occur here on earth too if we take time to stop and really listen, to tune in to a more profound divine reality. If we really apply ourselves in Lent, it can be a graced season as you fall into the hands of God. May it be for you richly prayerful . . . filled with times of stillness and silence, as you strive to listen more attentively to the Lord's heart. May he clean the lens so you can see more as He sees, without distortion, and delight in that clearer vision.

AMEN.