

Homily for Second Sunday of Lent - Year B

Most of us have seen the time-lapse photography of a lowly caterpillar becoming a butterfly. The footage usually starts with a ponderous little worm inching its way along a leaf that it devours. It looks silly and awkward as it labors to cover short distances. When it gets to about two inches in length, it takes a break from stuffing itself, finds a protective branch, and rigs up a silk thread by which it fastens its tail to that branch. Once secured, this little caterpillar begins to contort its body, gyrating in curious ways. At first, it's unclear what is happening. Then suddenly, the outer skin of this worm seems to unzip revealing a green chrysalis within. Minutes later, the molting is done and the green pod that is left becomes motionless for about 14 days.

Nothing seems to be happening for a while. But then on about day 12, the walls of the greenish cocoon become transparent. For the first time we can see that something dramatic has happened inside. But it's not until a day or two later that the full story is told. All at once, the little creature within begins to struggle and push until finally the shell of its miniature incubator cracks open. Pushing itself out of the impossibly small pod there comes a Monarch butterfly. Wet, trembling, and dark, it takes a few minutes to unfold itself, opening its collapsed wings for the first time. It forces them outward to their full capacity, spreading patterns of color and symmetry on this new canvas. And then this ex-earthbound caterpillar seizes the wind and lifts off, delicately managing the currents like a poem set in motion. It is one of the wonders of God's world that such drastic transformation takes place. Where there was once an ugly, cumbersome grub, laboring to get to the next leaf, there is now this magnificent butterfly that bears no resemblance to its former self. We almost can't take our eyes off it as it flits from flower to flower in such an effortless and magical way.

In fact, the very same word describes the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly is used both Mark's and Matthew's Gospels to describe what happened to Jesus in the most astounding event in Jesus' ministry, apart from his resurrection, that is the "Transfiguration." Both used the Greek word *metamorphoomai*, which is spelled it out in English "metamorphosis." And metamorphosis of course is a transfiguration: it's a change not of nature, but of form and of fashion; from this into that. Mark in his Gospel today puts all of the focus on Jesus. "He was transfigured (*metemorphōthē*) before them" (Mark 9:2). He used the aorist passive formation which indicates that some other agent, presumably God, did this to Jesus and that this activity is viewed as a whole, i.e. this is what happened. So, in the case of Jesus this transformation is not merely external, i.e. a change of clothes, nor is it metaphorical, i.e. a change of mind or attitude. The descriptions indicate that Jesus in his essence is transformed by some external power, i.e. this is something that happens to him. Further, this essential change becomes visible because it is marked by glistening, dazzling light that makes his face and his clothing irradiate blazing splendor.

As we heard, the event of transfiguration did not pass unnoticed. Peter and the other two disciples witnessed the glory of the Lord Jesus. Here Peter, James and John had an experience of Jesus totally transformed in his appearance. The light of God shone through him. They witnessed, as far as it is humanly possible to see with the human eyes, the brilliance that comes with the transforming glory that awaits those who will be changed in the image of Jesus Christ. What the Mystery of the Transfiguration realizes in Jesus is the glorification of human nature, elevated by God to the most profound intimacy, in limitless charity, with divine nature itself. Jesus-Man is truly transfigured: the glory of divinity is reflected in a dazzling way on his face and on his entire being.

For Jesus the “Transfiguration” was a special moment. He was now close to Jerusalem and hence close to his passion and death by crucifixion. This was the important moment when he had to strengthen his disciples particularly the ones who had been chosen to be close to him during his ministry. Jesus wanted his sonship to be revealed to them with the voice of the Father telling them that Jesus is his Beloved Son in whom he is well pleased and they ought to listen to him. These were the same words used at Jordan during his Baptism as he began his ministry. When his face shone like the sun, the event may have testified to the fact that Jesus was the true Light which enlightens everyone. For Jesus this was the confirmation of his mission given by his Father and the confidence that he has been faithful to him to the end.

The Gospel tells us that all on a sudden Moses and Elijah are seen talking with Jesus. Their presence is very significant. They represent the two great traditions of the Old Testament: Moses personified the Law of God’s people and Elijah the traditions of the great prophets. Their presence and their talking with Jesus indicate their total endorsement of all that Jesus is doing and also of all that he will experience in the days to come. Jesus is the natural continuation of their Jewish tradition and is fully part of it.

Suddenly there is a change at the end of this episode. They hear the gentle voice of Jesus who tells them to rise and not to be afraid. They look up and see Jesus standing there alone. They would have been surprised that the Father is gone, Moses and Elijah are gone. From now on they will see only Jesus but, after this experience, they know that he is not alone, that he has the full backing of his Father and of the Jewish tradition of the Law and the Prophets. They were learning the lesson that, though Jesus the Messiah would be rejected, suffer and die at the hands of his own people and their enemies, glory and victory would follow.

Being on the mountain was a wonderful experience. But the real place is on earth with the people of God. Thus, once the supernatural event is over, Jesus and his disciples go down the mountain. So, from the event of the Transfiguration, I would like to take two significant elements that can be summed up in two words: ascent and descent. We all need to go apart, to ascend the mountain in a space of silence, to find ourselves and better perceive the voice of the Lord. But we cannot stay there! Encounter with God inspires us anew to "descend the mountain" and return to the plain where we meet many brothers weighed down by fatigue, sickness, injustice, ignorance, poverty both material and spiritual. To these brothers in difficulty, we are called to bear the fruit of that experience with God, by sharing the grace we have received. And this is what Christian life is.

Just as the Transfiguration of Jesus strengthened the Apostles in their time of trial, each Holy Mass should be our source of Heavenly strength against our own temptations and a source of grace for the renewal of our lives during Lent. In addition, the Eucharist should be a source of daily transformation of both our minds and hearts, enabling us to see Jesus in every one of our brothers and sisters with whom we come in contact each day. In moments of doubt, pain and suffering, disappointment and despair, we need mountain-top experiences to reach out to God and listen to His consoling words: "*This is my beloved son/daughter in whom I am well pleased.*" Our 'Lenten penance' will lead us to the 'Easter joy.' Amen

AMDG