

## Readings for the Feast of the Transfiguration

6<sup>th</sup> August 2023

### First Reading: Daniel 7:9-10,13-14

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

### Second Reading: 2 Peter 1:16-19

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

### Gospel: St Luke 9:28b-36

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' Peter did not know what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

### **A Reflection for the Feast of the Transfiguration**

I don't go to the cinema very often, but there is a film which has been released this summer which I hope to see if at all possible – and sorry, if it disappoints you, but it's not *Barbie*, fun though that probably is.

The film I hope to see is *Oppenheimer* which tells the story of J Robert Oppenheimer, the American theoretical physicist who, in 1942, was recruited by the US army to lead the Manhattan Project. This was the project that, in a race against Nazi Germany, led to the development of the first atomic bomb. Oppenheimer is reputed to have been haunted by the destruction and loss of life caused by the two deployments of atomic bombs, the extent of which seems to have surprised even those who had worked on the project. He left his post a few months later and is believed to have urged President Truman to restrict further development of nuclear weapons. He later became associated with those trying to resolve the moral problems associated with scientific discovery and spent his later years working on the relationship between science and society.

As I'm sure that most, if not all, of you know, the first atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1945, the second on Nagasaki three days later. It has always struck me as hugely ironic that the dropping of the first atomic bomb was on the same day as the Feast of the Transfiguration. As fans of the Harry Potter books and films will know, transfiguration, a subject taught at Hogwarts School, causes changes in form or appearance of someone or something. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki certainly changed the form and appearance of those cities, and the lives of their citizens, and to a much greater extent than anything seen before.

But, beyond the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was a different type of transfiguration of sorts – in people's thinking. These bombings revealed to all humanity, and perhaps for the first time, the full horror of what humankind is capable of. It didn't stop the nuclear arms race of the following decades, nor indeed the sabre-rattling threats of using nuclear weapons that still continue to this day. However, there was recognition that proliferation of such weapons could result in the destruction of the whole world, and that led in turn to some non-proliferation treaties and more limited development than might otherwise have occurred. Of course, there is still work to do in that respect.

Perhaps another irony is that human beings have continued to transfigure the world in a different, slower, but also destructive way by our lifestyle choices and consumption of the world's resources, and the resulting effects on the climate, the natural world and other people. And we are taking our time in transfiguring our thinking and action on this, despite the warnings that have been seen across the globe in recent weeks, months and years.

So, I find the coincidence of the bombing of Hiroshima, with all its evidence of human destructiveness, and the Feast of the Transfiguration ironic because Jesus Christ came to inaugurate God's kingdom and all the goodness that should flow from that. At the Transfiguration, as we read in today's Gospel, the full glory of God in Jesus Christ was revealed to the three disciples present, the chosen witnesses, in order to strengthen their faith in preparation for what was to come.

Before Jesus' Transfiguration took place, the disciples had already heard much teaching from Jesus, they had been witnesses of many of his miracles, and been sent out on their own mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal. In response to Jesus' question, Peter had made his declaration that Jesus is 'the Messiah of God'. In response, Jesus had told them that he would suffer, die, and be raised again, and they struggled to believe it. So Jesus ascends onto a high mountain, as he will ascend to Calvary, and the disciples are witnesses to this powerful demonstration of Jesus' divine nature and manifestation of his light and glory.

In today's passage from the book of Daniel, we read of Daniel's vision of 'the ancient one' – God – giving dominion, glory and kingship to 'one like a human being' – Jesus. That glory, dominion and kingship lasts forever as he reigns as God and King, but was veiled for a period when he assumed a human body. When Jesus was transfigured, that veil was temporarily lifted to reveal his glory.

In the excerpt from the second letter of Peter, he has had time to reflect on the significance of that moment post-resurrection. Peter's faith has indeed been strengthened as he asserts that Jesus received honour and glory from God: these are not idle stories he says. We were witnesses. We know he is the Messiah. We saw his physical glory.

For us too, the account of the Transfiguration should strengthen our faith. It is a reminder that our faith is not based on idle stories but on a God who revealed himself to the world in the person of Jesus Christ, of which there were witnesses, and who will reign in glory for ever.

Many of you will know from previous occasions that I am very fond of the sonnets of the contemporary Anglican priest and poet Malcolm Guite. He has written a sonnet from the point of view of one of the disciples looking back on the Transfiguration from the darkness of Good Friday:

**Transfiguration** *Malcolm Guite*

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',  
on that one mountain where all moments meet,  
the daily veil that covers the sublime  
in darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.  
There were no angels full of eyes and wings,  
just living glory full of truth and grace.  
The Love that dances at the heart of things  
shone out upon us from a human face  
and to that light the light in us leaped up,  
we felt it quicken somewhere deep within,  
a sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope  
trembled and tingled through the tender skin.  
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar  
eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

Transfiguration is a feast of hope – 'a sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope' as this sonnet says. We also are made in God's image, and we choose how we respond to God's glory revealed in Christ and how we transfigure the world around us for good.

Even at the darkest moments of our lives, and the dropping of an atomic bomb must be one of the darkest in human history, God's glory, Christ's glory can break in to remind us that the darkness is not the reality, it cannot eclipse Christ's glory. As the poet says, not even the darkness of Good Friday could 'eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.'