

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Lent
March 17, 2019

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In a very real sense the Transfiguration of Christ was the *climax of the Incarnation*. This takes nothing away from the *purpose* of the Incarnation which was the Redemption of mankind. The Redemption was accomplished by the death of Christ on the Cross. But the Transfiguration brings us as close as we will ever get in this life to experience what it means when “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Peter, James, and John had a brief sight of the majesty and beauty of Almighty God shining through the flesh of their great friend and master Jesus of Nazareth. Human eyes saw divine Glory *very thinly veiled*.

In the Upper Room on Easter Day night Jesus appeared to His disciples in His glorified risen body. And as at the Transfiguration, the disciples were very much afraid. Dead men do not live again. But in the Resurrection appearances of the Risen Lord there was no *Voice from Heaven*, or the *Shekinah*, that mysterious cloud of God’s ancient and primal Presence. And at the Transfiguration there was an amazing light that appeared not to be shining on Jesus but *burning within Him and shining out*. Peter, James, and John saw all that and lived. No Old Testament holy man would have thought this possible. In the nearer Presence of God Moses took off his shoes and covered his face. (*Exodus 3:5-6*) Elijah also covered his face. (*I Kings 19:13*) And Isaiah said “Woe is me for I have seen the Lord of hosts.” (*Isaiah 6:5*)

It is a consistent Biblical affirmation that God’s holiness destroys sin. No one sees God and lives. This is not because God chooses to destroy sin but because sin is annihilated by what is stronger. Divine holiness is an *attribute*, not a decision, of Almighty God. And so the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant and the Sacraments of the Catholic Church are God’s provisions assuring His people of His Presence without destroying them. The sacraments *protect* us from God’s Presence even as they *are* His Presence under lowly forms we are allowed to see and receive. But the Transfiguration was no veiled sacrament! It was as close as any sinful man can get to the Glory of God and not be destroyed. If you want to think of the camel getting his nose under the corner of the tent and taking a look inside, you are on the right track!

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As with everything Christ did, the Transfiguration had a *purpose*. It was not an entertaining side show with smoke and mirrors! The Transfiguration provided a deliberate strengthening of the Apostles for events soon to come into Christ's life and theirs. Those events were His death and for most of them a witness meaning martyrdom. The Transfiguration was a light to carry into the darkness. And we have moments like that. Just this week was the story of a business executive who barely missed that fatal airline flight in Ethiopia, and said it was a life changing experience. For you and me it is a gift when at Mass one day the Real Presence of the Lord becomes blazing clear in the soul. Archbishop Anthony Bloom once told us his transfiguring moment happened when he was reading St Mark's Gospel one evening. He was suddenly aware of a Person standing behind him and radiating an incomparable love which made his soul jump for joy. The archbishop knew if he turned around he would see no one. So he didn't. Then Anthony Bloom fell into a deep sleep.

There may be a thousand ways, dramatic or not, when we have been given lesser transfigurations. We realized that behind something special *Someone* was present and infinitely greater than ourselves. And then the vision ended. Ordinary life went on. We cannot sustain the mountain top experience any more than Peter could. And then our souls have longer periods when prayers and worship seem ordinary and routine and unremarkable.

But the Gospel is good news, *always*. The Apostles reluctantly came down from the mount of Transfiguration. But they did not come alone! *Jesus came with them*. He even led them back into the ordinary life, including its periods of loneliness and suffering. His will was to be with them and us *every step of the way*. And where did it lead? No less than with His first disciples, Christ wills to give you and me the strength and courage to navigate the gloom of the Garden of Gethsemane and bring us to the joy of that sunrise breakfast with Him by the Sea of Galilee.