

Sun Feb 26 - Sunday next before Lent 2017

*When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear.*

‘Well, which is it?’, asked the Sunday School teacher. Is it Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon? Because, you see, I’ve discovered that there are **two** sites in the Holy Land for the **Transfiguration**, and it can’t possibly be **both!**’

She was voicing a **difficulty** that many pilgrims have, both literal pilgrims and metaphorical ones. I suspect she was also voicing a **misunderstanding** that many of us share about the nature of **God’s presence** and of his **glory**.

I’d like to reflect on those things a little, drawing briefly on **two poets** who have written about such things, albeit in very different vein. They are **John Henry Newman** whose wonderful poem was set to music by Edward Elgar as *The Dream of Gerontius*, and **Sylvia Plath** in a poem *Black Rook in Rainy Weather*, which some of you will have heard me quote before.

Both literal and metaphorical pilgrims long to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, to be close to his presence. Those lucky enough to visit the Holy Land have a particular opportunity to do so, and often a particular difficulty, as voiced by our Sunday school teacher. I guess on such a **literal** pilgrimage we hope that by physically putting ourselves in the very place where Jesus has been, his **presence** will be **tangible**. This hope is, I suspect,

rooted in a sense of **longing**; longing for **connection** with Jesus, longing to touch him and to be touched by him in some way.

But the **presence** of God is a **mysterious** thing, both tangible and yet not; predictable and yet not; close and yet distant. Many of us accompanying Fr Leonard a few years ago experienced faith changing moments in the Holy Land, but in **different places for different people**. And some of us were distressed to feel **no sense** of Christ’s presence at all **where we had most expected** to feel it. God’s presence was tangible for some in one place and yet intangible there for another. Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon? It seems one works for some, and another for others.

Today’s readings I think offer us both a **warning and** words of **comfort** about coming into God’s presence. We need to be careful what we wish for and long for. But nevertheless we are called, like Moses, to come to the mountain, to make the journey up the mountain into God’s presence. It is a question of **how** we do that.

Most of us are metaphorical pilgrims, or perhaps I should say literal pilgrims in a spiritual sense. Most of us spend much of our time, not least in **Lent** which is nearly here, **seeking the presence** of God, and trying to **improve our sensitivity** to his presence.

But we hear today of how **dazzling** and how **overwhelming** that presence is. The face of Jesus *shone like the sun*, and his clothes *became dazzling white*. We cannot bear to look into the sun. Even a bright cloud is too much for our eyes. The disciples, mere mortals like ourselves, *fell to the ground*, and were *overcome with*

*fear*. We surely would react likewise. **So how are we to experience God's glory and presence?**

In **Henry Newman's** poem, the main character Gerontius lies dying while his friends pray for his safe passage to heaven. He experiences a journey, one might say a pilgrimage, and is taken by an angel through demonic regions of horror, but on eventually to a point very near to the veiled presence of God.

He has already witnessed the grandeur of the angelic hosts, but now feels only **dread** as he begins to approach the throne of God. As the Angel of the Agony, the very same who comforted Jesus in Gethsemane, pleads to Jesus on his behalf, Gerontius declares himself **ready to meet his God**. Despite the **warning** of his Guardian Angel, Gerontius struggles free and runs longingly to Jesus' feet.

He gazes - for a moment - into the loving eyes of his Creator - and then is completely overwhelmed. *'Take me away, oh take me away'* he cries, *'that sooner I may rise, and go above, And see Him in the truth of everlasting day!'* We need to be careful what we wish for, and to realise the **immensity** of what we long for.

But **where does this leave us?** Are we caught in a trap of longing for God and yet unable to withstand his glorious presence? I think here **Sylvia Plath** can offer us **hope, and guidance**.

At the start of her poem she is out on a walk on a dreary rainy day. *I do not expect a miracle or an accident to set the sight on fire in my eye*, she writes. She has no sense of anything extraordinary

about to happen. She admits that she desires, *occasionally, some back talk from the mute sky*, but does not complain when it does not always arrive.

**Sylvia Plath** has learned several things, and **offers us hope**. We are **not caught in a trap** of longing that cannot be met.

**Firstly** she shows that **we can** experience the presence and glory of God. With a poet's sensitivity, she knows that at any time an angel may choose to flare suddenly at her elbow, **transfiguring** the most ordinary event with a celestial burning, and thus hallowing an interval, and giving relief from her fear of total neutrality. But we need grace to perceive that glory, to learn to **recognize** that presence and glory when we see it, to believe that *spasmodic tricks of radiance*, as she puts it, are indeed genuine experiences of God's presence and glory.

**Secondly** she has learned that God's glory does **not appear on demand**. Moses knew that too. Even though he was commanded by God to ascend the mountain and knew that he would receive tablets of stone from God and speak with God, he still had to wait six days on top of the mountain in order to hear God's voice. He knew he was in the presence of God; the cloud signalled that, just as the psalmist signals for us that there is nowhere in this world that we are out of the presence of God. But he, and we too, have to wait to hear God's voice. We cannot command God's presence. Pilgrims to the Holy Land come to realise that too.

**Thirdly** Sylvia Plath realises that experience of God's presence and glory is **not down to God alone**. We have our part to play.

She sees that it is she herself who is *ignorant of whatever angel may choose to flare suddenly at her elbow*. That doesn't mean it will not happen; it means that she doesn't know **when** it might happen. What we need to learn is to hone our sensibilities and to be expectant. She says, *I now walk wary (for **it could happen** even in this dull, ruinous landscape)*. Admittedly she walks *still skeptical at times, yet politic* because she has learned that it could happen.

So from our readings and from our two poets, we have both a **warning** and **words of comfort**. We need an awareness of the immensity and power of God's presence and of his glory. As we pilgrims journey on, longing for experience of God's nearer presence and glory, we should be careful what we wish for.

Yet we should not give up hope of such experience. It is there for us, not on demand, even in those places where we might most expect it, but in God-given moments in which we glimpse the glory of God - in little moments - which is all we can manage for now. But we may put our trust in God and in his Son Jesus Christ. We know that we will come at last, with Gerontius and all the saints, *to rise, and go above*. On that day we **will** see him face to face in all his glory, and be able to gaze on him for evermore.