

Have you ever had one of those experiences; one of those we call the ‘mountain-top’ experiences? It might have been something relatively common, like that moment you first held your newborn child. Or maybe you have had an experience that was out of the ordinary, but an experience that gave you the clear sense that God was real, that God was there. It may have even been a painful experience, but one that somehow made you aware that you were not going through that experience alone. Many of us have had that experience, some have had several. They are wonderful things, those mountain-top experiences. But they are also very dangerous things. They can confuse us. And they can distract us from being and doing what we are called to be and do.

I have met people who seem to collect mountaintop experiences. They tell story after story of the times they have felt or even seen God in action. They go through the day looking for that next mountain top, looking for the signs of wonder that might mean God is near. As they do, they begin to overlook the darker places where those around them may be hiding in fear, hoping someone might be God’s hand reaching out to them.

Sometimes as we worship, we spend time wondering what we might do to make our worship experiences more like mountain tops, doing things that will give people that sense of awe, that warm feeling that God might be in this place. There is nothing wrong with that.

Sometimes, those mountaintop experiences can distract us though. For example, in today’s story, we might get all caught-up like so many others in trying to work out just where this amazing transfiguration experience took place. People have spent lives doing that.

And each one distracting us from what is important about that day on the mountain top, and about what is important in each and every mountain top experience we might have. Because where it happens is not important. How many times it happens, and who experiences the most of them is not important. Those are distractions. A mountain top experience can be a very real thing, but it does not happen to simply give us a feeling of awe, or even of wonder. It is not just about a feeling. The voice that spoke from the darkness that day did not say that Jesus was God’s chosen Son, and they should all feel amazed about it. The voice said that Jesus was God’s chosen Son, and they should listen to him. The experience on that mountain top was not meant to make the three disciples feel anything at all. It was meant to remind them, that in his light they are called to listen to what Jesus has been telling them and to do what he has told them to do.

Here and throughout the New Testament there is a strong message that our world is very dark, and that Jesus is the light of God penetrating earth’s blackness and bleakness. It is the message that the Christian church was and is the lingering glow of divine radiance pushing the transformations of heaven a little further through recessed shady corners of the world. As we say in the Book of Common Prayer (1662) quoting Matthew at the Offertory: “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) How are we glowing today?

Think of the ancient legend first told by Christians living in the catacombs under the streets of Rome, that pictures the day when Jesus went back to glory after finishing all his work on earth. The angel Gabriel met Jesus in heaven and welcomed him home. “Lord,” he said, “Who have you left

behind to carry on your work?” Jesus told him about the disciples: the little band of fishermen, farmers, and housewives.

“But Lord,” said Gabriel, “what if they fail you?! What if they lose heart, or drop out?! What if things get too rough for them, and they let you down?” Jesus replied, “Then all I have done will come to nothing!” “But don’t you have a backup plan?” Gabriel asked. “Isn’t there something else to keep it going, to finish your work?” “No,” said Jesus, “there was no backup plan. The church was it. There was nothing else.” “Nothing else?” asked Gabriel. “But what if they fail?” And the early Christians knew Jesus’ answer. “They won’t fail, Gabriel,” he said. “They won’t fail!” Isn’t that a marvellous thing?! Here are the Christians of Rome, dug into the earth like moles, tunnelling out of sight because of the terrors of Nero up above. They are nothing in that world! They are poor, despised, and insignificant! Yet they know the promise of Jesus: “You won’t fail! You’re my people, and you won’t fail!” It is like the story told of a man walking through the Royal Melbourne Show when he met a tiny girl. She was carrying a great big fluff of fairy floss on a stick, almost as large as herself! He said to her, “How can a little girl like you eat all that fairy floss?! “Well,” she said to him, “I’m really much bigger on the inside than I am on the outside!”

So it is to be with us. By listening to what Jesus has told us what to do, on the outside, we seem to be nothing, like Jesus’ helpless disciples below the mountain of the Transfiguration, but on the inside, we are as big as the kingdom and the power and the glory of your God.

Transfiguration — transformation — what would our community be without us? Kew Primary School, Trinity Grammar School, Ruyton Girls’ School and the many community organisations that were born here or thrived here or influenced by past and present parishioners. What would our area be like without Holy Trinity Kew? Where would our nation be without the conscience and acts of the people of God? There is a marvellous little story tucked away in the pages of Edward Gibbon’s seven-volume work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It tells of a humble little monk named Telemachus living out in the farming regions of Asia Minor.

Telemachus had no great ambitions in life. He loved his little garden and tilled it through the changing seasons. But one day in the year 391 AD, he felt a sense of urgency, a call of God’s direction in his life. Although he did not know why, he felt that God wanted him to go to Rome, the heart and soul of the empire. In fact, the feelings of such a call frightened him but he went anyway, praying along the way for God’s direction. When he finally got to the city, it was in an uproar! The armies of Rome had just come home from the battlefield in victory and the crowds were turning out for a great celebration. They flowed through the streets like a tidal wave and Telemachus was caught in their frenzy and carried into the Colosseum.

He had never seen a gladiator contest before but his heart sickened. Down in the arena, men hacked at each other with swords and clubs. The crowds roared at the sight of blood and urged their favourites on to the death. Telemachus could not stand it. He knew it was wrong; this wasn’t the way God wanted people to live or to die. Little Telemachus worked his way through the crowds to the wall down by the arena. “In the name of Christ, forbear!” he shouted. Nobody heard him, so he crawled up onto the wall and shouted again: “In the name of Christ, forbear!” This time the few who heard him only laughed. But Telemachus was not to be ignored. He jumped into the arena and ran through the sands toward the gladiators. “In the name of Christ, forbear!” The crowds laughed at the silly little man and threw stones at him. Telemachus, however, was on a mission. He threw himself between two gladiators to stop their fighting. “In the name of Christ, forbear!” he cried.

They hacked him apart! They cut his body from shoulder to stomach and he fell onto the sand with the blood running out of his life. The gladiators were stunned and they stopped to watch him die. Then the crowds fell back in silence, and, for a moment, no one in the Colosseum moved. Telemachus' final words rang in their memories: "In the name of Christ, forbear!" At last they moved, slowly at first, but growing in numbers. The masses of Rome filed out of the Colosseum that day, and the historian Theodoret reported that never again was a gladiator contest held there! This was all because of the witness and the testimony of a single Christian who had the glow-in-the-dark power of grace and God's goodness.

I will close with John Donne Dean of St Paul's famous prayer which anticipates when we are no longer dazzled by the brightness of Christ's glory but share it in God's presence. That is our hope as Christians sent to serve God in the world.

*Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity: in the habitations of thy majesty and glory, world without end. Amen.*

Fr Robert Newton