

Last Sunday after the Epiphany; The Transfiguration of our Lord
+ Luke 9:28-36 +
“Jesus Glory is Your Own”

About eight days after he said these words, Jesus took Peter, John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothing became dazzling white. Just then, two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him! They appeared in glory and were talking about his departure, which he was going to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem.

Peter and those with him were weighed down with sleep, but when they were completely awake, they saw his glory and two men standing with him.

As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let’s make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not realize what he was saying.

While he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them. They were afraid as they went into the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” After the voice had spoken, they found Jesus alone. They kept this secret and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen.

Have you ever heard of Wilfred Owen? Owen was born in 1893 on the border of Wales and England. As a young man he considered becoming a Christian minister. But not only did he not become a minister; he lost his faith in Jesus altogether. He died in 1918, fighting on the fields of France in the closing days of the First World War. He wrote several poems about his experience in battle. I would like to share one of them with you today, a poem some of you may remember from school, called “Futility.” In this poem, Owen describes the experience of finding a dead soldier in a snowbank. The full title: “Futility: A Poem about Finding a Dead Soldier”:

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

He begins with nursery rhyme faith in the “kind old sun.” The sun gives energy to a whole solar system; the sun wakens the seeds. Surely the sun that woke this man so many mornings when he was a boy back in Britain, and even woke him in France every morning in his camps and fox holes, surely that kind old sun can wake him now!

But then the second verse takes a dark turn into reality: it can't. And it leaves Owen questioning: Why is there life at all? Why did the sun bother to blaze at all and warm this old earth? Is this all there is, this march toward death?

Something in most humans wants to cry out that it can't be so. No! we want to say. We were born for more than dying on battlefields. We were born for more than sorrow. Surely life isn't just working and weeping and loving and losing and toiling and tiring until finally we die. That can't be all there is. Was the earth set in motion just so that it could one day grow cold and perish?

Something in most people, everyone except the most jaded nihilists, protests. Would Owen, who no longer believed in God, have written this poem if there wasn't still a little protest against those ideas in his own heart?

You and I are used to hoping for more. Many of us were raised by father and mother and Holy Mother Church to hope for more. In the arms of father and mother and Mother Church we were taught to hope for more. But not everyone is with us on that. There are a growing number who have bought the promise of scientism that the universe will grow colder and colder and colder until at last it collapses on itself. And that's it; there's nothing more, they say. Make the best of it while you can (whatever "the best" is to you); the grave is all there is.

So goes the faith of many of our neighbors, and even many of those who were once raised to hope for more. Hopelessness has overtaken their hearts. Does it threaten yours? If you think you are standing firm, watch out that you do not fall. A young man who once aspired to baptize and preach wound up writing that hopeless poem called "Futility."

But we are left with two camps: one that protests death and insist there's more, and one that accepts it and insists there's nothing more. Who will win? Who's right? Isn't that the question of the day? "Too often!" you say. Yes, agreed. But this is a question where rightness is everything, and both sides can't be right.

But as soon as both voices are heard, a third pops up. He knew the heart of Wildred Owen and his lack of faith, just as well as he knows you and me and our mustard seeds of faith. He knows those who protest death and those who accept death. He knows those who expect nothing more and those who expect everything more.

And our Lord Jesus has loved them all. And so what did our Lord Jesus do? In the words of another poet, Julia Ward Howe:

In the beauty of the lilies
Christ was born across the sea
With the glory in his bosom
That transfigures you and me.

The Son of God, Jesus Christ, took the glory that only he has and he brought it down to earth. And he put that glory not in all the things we use to fight death, but he put it into death itself. Jesus took the glory that only he has as the Son of God and he brought it down into the working and the weeping, the loving and the losing, the toiling and tiring. He brought it into the grave. By his crucifixion his glory now shines

even into that darkest and emptiest of all places. It is there in his crucifixion that Jesus shed and spread his glory onto all the people of the earth.

That's why he was transfigured on the mountaintop. As we are told in today's Gospel, there our Savior shone in a glory far brighter than the sun, the kind of glory that turns the kind old son into a black hole. What was he talking about with Moses and Elijah? He was talking about his departure: his death, his crucifixion, his burial. He was discussing how he would triumph not through power but through weakness, how he would have victory not through life but through death.

The glory of Jesus shines not only because he lives, but especially because he died. Jesus' death changes things for those who protest it and those who accept it. To those who protest it Jesus says, "Yes, there is more, more than you can ever imagine. But you'll find it in dying." And to those who accept death and say there is nothing more, he says, "Yes, death is a real part of life. And yet in me you will find more glory there than you have ever imagined."

"Take up your cross and follow me," is what Jesus says to all. "Come with me on the way of dying. Because I went first and took your sins away, you will live as you have never lived before. My glory is yours, and it is yours in my death and yours."

St. Paul writes to the Romans: **Do you not know that all of you who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in a new life.** You see, the Christian life accepts death, but in Christ's death believes there is much more. Christ has turned death into God's workshop for glorious new creations.

We have days where we lean toward the mind of Mr. Owen and ask: Was it for this? Was it for struggle and death? Was it just for this that the clay grew tall? For this sorrow, this pain, this loss? Hear God's answer: No! You were born to know Jesus and his glory, to receive it through his death, to hold it in your own death, to see him face to face, and to follow him right now as his new creation.

But following him means that at the same time the answer is "yes." You were not born only to weep, to struggle, to lose, and to die. But you were born for those things, too. Because in Jesus we are born to take up our cross and follow him. We are called to endure pain in faith and to call on him for help and to learn through every sorrow that it is in losing that we win, that it is in death that we live, through the glory of his death. Amen.