



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 06 August 2006
Title: **Feast of the Transfiguration**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Exodus 34:29-35
Second Reading 2 Peter 1:13-21
Gospel Luke 9:28-36

I often have a problem remembering birthdays and usually need some mnemonic, something to jog the memory. My sister Lauren's birthday is October 12, for example. Until recently, that date was also Columbus Day for us. Now the United States moves that holiday around so that it always falls on a Monday, and I've had to work out another system. And then there's my father's birthday: his is September 11. That used to be harder to remember since it didn't have any special event to relate to it. Now that's all changed. It's even more confusing since my father now refuses to celebrate the original date and keeps September 10 as his birthday. September 11 will never be the same for any of us again.

August 6 wasn't anything special in the Church calendar until perhaps the year 1000. Sometime around then some parish in some Near Eastern city built a new church and named it after the event we just heard about in today's Gospel: the weird and wonderful experience of three of Jesus' closest friends up on that hill. No one appears to have used the Transfiguration as the name for a church before, but each year it got more popular until the day they dedicated that new church, August 6, was ever afterwards kept as the official feast of the Transfiguration. And for the Christian world, there used to be no other reason to think anything special about August 6...until 1945.

On this day, 61 years ago, three planes left a military airfield on the little island of Tinian, due west of us, and headed towards Japan. I don't know if any of those onboard knew it was the feast of the Transfiguration; I do know that a Catholic chaplain blessed the men and their mission before they left.

The effect of what happened as a result of that mission reads eerily like a parody of today's Gospel: an unearthly bright light, normal appearances changed, and a luminous cloud. I wonder sometimes whether any of the Christians in Hiroshima were thinking about the Transfiguration on that day. Like another Japanese city- Nagasaki, it had a sizable Christian population. Had anyone been to an early church service, a 7:30 mass perhaps? It was, after all, only 8:15 on a Monday morning.

All of the Christian churches in the center of town were immediately destroyed: the Franciscan parish, the Jesuit church, the cathedral. Poorer denominations, made even poorer by wartime restrictions and persecutions by the Japanese authorities, probably had built in wood, and they were gone. The very English-looking stone Anglican Church was left with its walls- you can see the photo in today's bulletin- a significant parallel to similar photos of our old Malate cathedral after the Battle of Manila. An educated, but conservative estimate puts the number of casualties from the atomic bomb over Hiroshima at 140,000, including later deaths from radiation poisoning. For the world, August 6, like September 11, will never be known for anything else again.

And yet, we are celebrating something here other than Hiroshima Day. It remains for us the feast of the Transfiguration, and the significance of this revelation of who Jesus Christ is still our theme today despite any other associations. Attempts to explain the event away by saying it was either the apostles dreaming, or else an Easter story that somehow got lost in the bible are not convincing. Not for me. The Transfiguration remains one of the most powerful biblical events I know because it shows God's power and presence and glory shining through the Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus. It is the surety given that everything he had said and done were part of God's plan for the salvation of the world.

It says in Luke's gospel that the mysterious, otherworldly figures identified as Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus. It says, "They were speaking of his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." That's bible-talk. What it means is that they were discussing Jesus' fate: the very sad next act that was coming in the drama of salvation: a death that would be a "necessary evil." Necessary Evil was, by the way, the code name of one of the planes on the next Pacific run to Nagasaki. And "necessary evil" is the way that many have talked about both of these bombings and the era of terror, threat and deep anxiety- of "mutual assured destruction" in which we have lived ever since.

This terror is like the cloud that overshadowed them. Scripture today tells us that: "they were terrified as they entered the cloud." Well they might be, since they were in the presence of the transfiguring God and could see what can happen when Divine Power touches human flesh. The world also entered a cloud on August 6, 1945 and beheld a transfiguring power that could vaporize human flesh. It learned the awful truth about moral choices, about fallible decisions that could affect tens of thousands in the flash of the moment. It learned not that human limitations can be transfigured, but that human loves, human aspiration, human potential could be transfigured by death and hateful destruction.

You see, Christ's death, his "departure" in Jerusalem was supposed to end the hatred, stop the killing, and reconcile the world to God. But we're still at it. World War One was supposed to "the War to End All Wars." It didn't.

Other versions of the Transfiguration story tell us that at least one of the purposes of the event was to teach the disciples not to be afraid of the terrors ahead- that good could come from it. But the disciples didn't learn from their experience of the Transfiguration: they gave in to their fears and ran and hid while our salvation was won on the wood of the Cross.

What did we learn from Transfiguration Day 1945? Despite knowing the incredible extent of the damage at Hiroshima on the Monday, yet another mission was sent out on Thursday. This time to Nagasaki. This time the deaths were 74,000. I will let the experts debate, as they still do, whether these attacks brought an earlier end to the War than might have been the case in an all-out invasion of Japan: of potential Allied deaths in the millions as an insane military dictatorship would have been overthrown town by blindly patriotic town. Whatever the motive, Hiroshima and its sister disaster took the world into a new era in which we still live. The first atomic test in the mountains of New Mexico, a test code-named 'Trinity' by the way, is being duplicated in Iran even as I speak, and the world once again wonders what the next cataclysmic date will be that will be changed on our calendars forever.

I will say, as your pastor, as a Christian and as a human being, that I do not hold war to be a thing of God. Whatever its causes, however devout and good its warriors, it is a thing of our fallen nature, and we find good in it only as the least of many other evils at the time. When we participate in these evils, especially when we in our arrogance deem them "necessary", it should not be in pride and glory, but on our knees in the realization of just how far we have fallen from the transfigured humanity we were meant to be.

This celebration of the Transfiguration of Christ on the mountain explodes into the long, green-vestmented season that stretches until Advent with its gold and white, its themes of transcendent glory and awesome warnings. It commends us to celebrate the glory of Christ as the Son of God, radiant in light. But as we all realize, there is a cost to our celebration, and this feast will never, ever be the same for those who observe it on this date.

August 6: so many themes for one poor, little day: Which shall we celebrate? I propose that we just celebrate Jesus. It was He who is transfigured today, who is offered on the cross and the altar today, and in Whom all of us sinful, broken human beings can be reconciled to God and each other- so much potential, so much gone to waste, so much that Christ can still redeem. Thanks be to God.

