

“The appearance of His face was altered.”

Lk 9:29

We heard last week that the Spirit led Our Lord into the desert deliberately so that He could be tempted by the devil. This was a set-piece battle between the Son of God and Satan. Our Lord chose to confront the devil to draw onto His own shoulders the brunt of the devil's attack on humanity, to draw his sting as it were. Our Lord's temptations were part of the work of our redemption. This week we are given a glimpse of what is at stake in that battle.

Almost whenever the Christian message is broadcast on the world's media, it is put in the context of reform or welfare, of economic aid or of tolerance for those who are different from ourselves. And whilst these issues may overlap with the Gospel message of Christ's compassion, such reports invariably miss the point.

The Catholic Faith is about the salvation of souls. Christ came down to earth to turn our hearts from sin and attachment to the things of this world so that we might turn to Him instead and become attached to God and the things of God. He came to call us to repentance so that we might say sorry for our sins, and to change our behaviour and our attitudes. He came to cleanse us from sin, and to put a clean heart within us once more.

In today's First Reading Abram's offering is consumed by the holy and purifying fire of God, and a new covenant is established between Abram and his offspring on the one hand and God on the other.

In today's Second Reading St Paul warns us of the end which awaits those who depart from that covenant, and whose minds are set on earthly things. But he goes on to hint at the reward that awaits those who remain faithful to that covenant: a citizenship in heaven and a transformation into the likeness of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

And then in the Gospel passage we have St Luke's account of that extraordinary incident witnessed by Ss Peter, James, and John, and referred to by each of them in their Letters later on in the New Testament, namely the Transfiguration. In all three of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the Transfiguration follows on from Our Lord's declaration to His Apostles that the Son of Man must be handed over to the Sanhedrin and put to death. The Transfiguration, high up on the top of Mt Tabor which towers above the flat lands of the surrounding countryside just five miles to the east of Nazareth where the Son of God first came into the world, is given to the Apostles to strengthen their hearts to face the trials that are soon to follow.

But the Transfiguration does more than that.

Long ago, in the Book of Exodus, God made it clear that no mere creature, whilst still living on this earth, could see the face of God and live (Ex 33:20). In the Transfiguration, God still does not reveal the fulness of His glory – goodness knows but what He *does* reveal is enough to make the three Apostles faint, as we see in Matthew's account (Mt 17:6) – but on Mt Tabor God does, nonetheless, allow something of His splendour to shine through the humanity of His Incarnate Son, through the human body of Our Lord. 'The appearance of His face was altered, and His clothing became dazzling white,' St Luke tells us in today's Gospel passage.

In this moment of Transfiguration we catch a glimpse of the glory of heaven; we are given a fleeting foretaste not so much, perhaps, of what it will be like in heaven but of just how different the reality of heaven is from the reality of this world.

Heaven cannot be described: we none of us know what heaven will be like, and any preconceptions we may have will be utterly confounded. Whatever we think heaven will be like, it won't be!

But what we *do* have in the Gospels and in the writings of the great saints of the Church is an assurance that the reality of heaven will be completely different from anything we have encountered on earth. Entering heaven will be an utterly transformative experience, as St Paul says in today's Second Reading. Not just our souls but our bodies also will be transformed into a perfect likeness to Christ, and we will enter into the life of the Blessed Trinity. (One of the reasons why we should not deliberately destroy our bodies by being cremated when we die.) This transformation will involve a purification from all that clouds our sight of God: the moment of transformation will burn and purify, sanctify and dazzle, and we shall become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48). And we shall enter into a reality wholly different from the reality of this life.

This is what Lent is about: preparing for, and beginning to participate in, this transformation, this purifying and sanctifying encounter with the living God. Through the self-acknowledgement of our unworthiness in penitential devotions such as the Stations of the Cross, and through the cleansing touch of God's hand in the Sacrament of Confession, we can lift our minds from being set on earthly things and raise them instead to a love of God and the things of God. This, after all, is what we are commanded to do by God the Father in today's Gospel passage: 'This is my Son, the Chosen One; listen to Him!'

Holy is God. Holy and strong. Holy immortal One. Have mercy on us.