

In his Epistle to the Romans St Paul produces the striking and forceful image of the cosmos or created order being like a woman in the last stages of pregnancy. "The whole creation" he says, "has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." In another place Christ speaks of the pain a mother endures as she strives to give birth but of the overwhelming joy when the child is born.

This image is to be applied directly to us as we journey towards the Kingdom reminding us of the suffering to be borne here and the joy which awaits us both here and especially later when by his grace we are reunited with the Lord. It is especially relevant in this period of the feast of the Transfiguration in which Christ, glowing with a whiteness which the disciples cannot look upon, as we see in the icon, shows us what we can become or indeed are becoming. After he is transfigured with Moses and Elijah, who represent the law and the prophets in Israel's history, he returns to his human state, though a special one of being both God and Man in this world. It reminds us of our situation in this world of yearning to be born again or from above in the likeness of Christ, and to complete the difficult journey on which we have embarked and in which we stumble so often because of our sinful humanity.

And now today we read this familiar story of Christ feeding a crowd of five thousand in a re-enactment of the God of Israel providing food for the children of Israel for forty years as they journey from Egypt through the desert of Sinai to the land promised to the patriarch Abraham. The reactions of the crowd to the miracles of Christ are interesting in their diversity. A few weeks ago we heard how after the exorcising of the man who had many demons and the mass suicide of the swine where the demons begged to go, the crowd were shocked by the titanic battle between Christ and the demons and were anxious that he should move on out of their country as quickly as possible. Evil was a subject too hot for them and I witnessed a similar reaction some years ago after the prayers of exorcism in the service of baptism from a person who was nominally Christian. No for him evil was simply the absence of good.

Another reaction to Christ is incredulity, "What sort of man is this that even winds and sea obey him?" or the lack of it and the total acceptance of his unlimited power by the centurion two weeks ago in saying do not trouble yourself to come to my house but "speak the word only and my servant shall be healed". Somewhere between these two reactions is the incident immediately following the transfiguration when Christ comes down the mountain and finds the disciples who had not been with him in the midst of an argument with the father of an epileptic boy. He is angry because the disciples cannot heal him. Christ teases him with the question, "Do you believe that I can do this?" It is a question which puts him on the spot. "I'd like to believe because I know your reputation, but I have my doubts". All he can truthfully answer is, "I believe; help thou my unbelief". But this is enough for Christ. He accepts where the father is on the path of faith and by the frightening convulsive healing he moves him forward in trusting God.

The three disciples Peter, James and John have a life-changing experience on Mount Tabor. They witness an event which they could never have imagined. They are literally blinded by the vision which they see and can only look up when Christ returns to his human form and bids them look up. But perhaps their experience of the life of faith is not so fundamentally different from our own despite the intensity and magnitude of their experience compared with our own. They move step by step to a deeper faith and frankly we are sometimes shocked by what they say; for example, by

arguing who shall have the seats of greater authority in the kingdom which is to come and who will have the lower ones.

The process of growing in faith and trust in God is one which is constantly at work in us. The gospels tell us that it starts like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, and grows to be huge like the tallest of trees. The Holy Spirit within us is a kind of guarantee of this work of sanctification which is meant to raise us up to the fulness of the stature of Christ. The transfigured Christ who is the subject of the feast is the goal towards which we strive in our weak and mortal state. And incidentally, I often hear people confessing that they have doubts about God and what the Orthodox Church teaches on various issues. Embrace your doubts and do not hide them away. We cannot honestly subscribe to all the teachings of the Church in utter sincerity. These doubts, like the father of the epileptic, are a door into a fuller understanding of God's dealing with us and an opportunity to deepen our faith.

Today's gospel reading presents us with a miracle on a huge scale. Five thousand are fed from five loaves and two fish. Difficult to believe. Not really if we look at the miracle of creation and how the world operates in terms of natural and scientific laws, the environmental balance, meteorology, the seasons etc. Rather they lead us to wonder, like Einstein, at the complexity and wisdom of creation.

"The righteous shall live by faith", is a verse with which we are all familiar and to which we increasingly aspire. As we groan with the cosmos waiting to be born, may God grant us to experience the joy of deeper faith and wonder in our lives which is summed up in that wonderful phrase in the Gospel "...and the crowd glorified God saying, 'We never saw it like this'".

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