

ARE YOU READY FOR THE CLIMB?

In the modern lexicon of social and political terms, there is a word in common use today that seeks to communicate a critical message. That word is “inflection.” One of its most potent meanings is “a departure or radical change from one idea or world vision to a distinctly new way of thought.” The change is not inconsequential or insignificant, but strikes to the very heart of human meaning. For example, the industrial revolution was such an “inflection” in that it shifted the world from a largely agrarian economy to one driven by automation, machines, and new vistas about the human person and his/her potential. Inflection points to a radical change. What was -- will no longer be. Something new has come to into birth and we and our world are very different.

The Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ may rightly be called “the Divine Inflection.” The event marked a change, the like of which had never been witnessed. Since the Creation of the world, the human person never had a “glimpse” of God, never saw the contours of his actual presence, never could have the real satisfaction of getting so close to Divinity that it radically altered our humanity. In the Transfiguration of the Lord – “behold all things are made new.”

In a sermon on the Holy Transfiguration, St. Anastasios of Mt. Sinai said: “Upon Mount Tabor, Jesus revealed to his disciples a heavenly mystery. While living among them he had spoken of the kingdom and of his second coming in glory, but to banish from their hearts any possible doubt concerning the kingdom and to confirm their faith in what lay in the future by its prefiguration in the present, he gave them on Mount Tabor a wonderful vision, a vision of God’s glory, a foreshadowing of the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus gave a new vision, a fleeting insight into who God is and what it means to be close to Him. Jesus mystically opened the God-heart to a group that never expected it!

For a brief moment, the veil was lifted, the curtain was parted, the Mystery penetrated and the human person embraced eternity. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ revealed Himself – and the human person became new, recreated with eyes open to a New Creation, a new way of living, to the gates of a New Jerusalem. All the power that Jesus was, all that compelled Him to work miracles, to heal the sick, and even raise the dead was, for a singular moment, exposed in time and history. In a flash, the human person pierced the Divine Beauty and this brings to mind the words of Fyodor Dostoevsky many centuries later: “It is by Beauty that we shall be saved.” On that mystical day, Jesus revealed Himself as the “Divine Inflection.” The question is: How do you and I make that same encounter in our lives? In the face of a pandemic, social conflict and unrest, a political maelstrom, the turbulence

caused by a world trying to lure us away from God not towards Him – *how are we transfigured? Where is our moment of vision?*

Every minute detail of this Evangelical event is, indeed, full of a profound significance. Yet there is an aspect of this Feast which is often overlooked: the symbolic meaning of Mount Tabor. You and I can feel those Transfiguration-graces only if we understand the mountain. It is true that mountains, both in the Old and New Testaments, play a seminal role in the manifestation of and encounter with God. Could Jesus have been Transfigured on level turf? by the sea? in a valley? even in the synagogue or in the home of one of His Apostles? Certainly yes. He is beyond constraints. Yet it was up a rugged mountain that He chose to bestow this revelation of His Divinity. He compelled Peter, James, and John to climb, to struggle up boulders and crags and narrow pathways, to undoubtedly sweat their way to the apex and there reveal to the exhausted seekers, ever so briefly, the “face” of God. Because they “saw” it – they were bowed low and were transformed.

Mount Tabor is for us a figure of repentance. We note that, like for the disciples, in order for us to see the transfiguration or to hope to be transfigured ourselves (*metanoia*), we will first have to climb up, to mount, from our present condition, to spiritually “sweat” and feel discomfort in our unseen bones. In short, while it was the Lord’s loving generosity that moved Him to transfigure Himself before human eyes, it is the fervent repentance in the human heart and soul that can move us ever closer, ever more intimately to a mystical encounter with that “Love Divine all loves excelling.” We can change our stiffening or cooling hearts if we, like the chosen three climbers of the Transfiguration, do the sweaty climb of genuine repentance.

As the Orthodox spiritual writer and philosopher, Professor Jean-Claude Larchet writes of this feast: “Our transfiguration or salvation is like Mount Tabor: however hard we try, we will not be guaranteed salvation through a swift, if arduous, climb today. Salvation takes a lifetime, it is a long climb up a long slope, which is why the Lord gives most of us so long to live... Salvation is a long struggle which requires determination and perseverance, patient longsuffering, and the conversion of one’s heart.” That is the climbing, the exertion, the work that must be done if we are to “cast our eyes upon the Lord.”

The ascetic Fathers are in clear agreement: our spiritual progress is not sudden and dramatic. And there are many obstacles on our path to *theosis*, aptly described by St. Athanasius the Great, as “becoming by grace what God is by nature.” Where are we on that climbing journey? There are many things that we use as excuses for shrinking from the climb – meals to prepare, work to get to, cell phones to answer (and talk on

incessantly), computers to sit at for untold hours, homes to care for, recreational pursuits to enjoy, etc.

Yet there is also the expectation of the Lord Jesus that we actively and faithfully feed our spiritually starving heart – that we do the climbing *everyday* by doing such things as the faithful reading of Sacred Scripture, keeping the Church’s prescribed fasting periods, integrating silence and quiet prayer times into our everyday, making the reading of a spiritual book or lives of the Saints, or books on elements of the faith, doing the works of love and charity for others, helping care for, physically and in support of the Temple given to us for worship, regularly coming before God in Confession and to receive the Bread of Life and Cup of Eternal Salvation in the Divine Liturgy. This is climbing, this is enduring the journey up “the narrow way” that leads to the Divine Encounter, rather than the wide way of ease, convenience, and ultimate sadness of heart and soul.

We may well ask ourselves what are those little sacrifices that we have made since the Feast of Transfiguration a year ago? How far have we ascended up our own Mount Tabor? How have we changed over this time? What have we done to lead a better life since then? How have we improved? What have we given to God that we had not given Him before? It is this that we call progress: in what way am I a better Orthodox Christian than a year ago? Ultimately, do we see clearly “The Divine Inflection” in US? Has our climb left the past behind us and introduced us to a new conversion and transformation? Am I different as a person because the Lord Jesus broke through the barriers of human making to reveal to us the “face” of God?

Take His hand today, let Him help you climb, and exert, and sweat spiritually – but keep your eyes focused on the apex. What you will see and feel there will no doubt move your heart to exclaim, in the Apostles’ words, “Lord, it is good that we are here!”

Asking the blessing of the Lord on you and praying for your spiritual courage, I am,

Faithfully in the Transfigured Christ,

Fr. Dimitrios