

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, August 6, 2023

The Transfiguration of our Lord

Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

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The Beauty of Sicily ***Homily for the Transfiguration***

I cannot recall how many times, growing up, I heard people saying that Sicily is one of the most enchanting places on earth. The recent celebrated TV series *White Lotus* has reminded everyone of this and apparently, as a result, an increasing number of people are now choosing it as a destination for their holidays. I was given the opportunity to visit Sicily myself some ten years ago – and I *did* see there a beauty I will never forget: the sun-soaked beaches of Cefalu', the breath-taking Byzantine mosaics of Monreale and Palermo, the timeless appeal of the Valley of Temples in Agrigento.

But an even more haunting beauty was waiting for me in places of Sicily where tourists will never go. I travelled there during Holy Week, two years in a row, to visit a number of rehab centres for former drug, alcohol, and gambling addicts and shelters for people who had been rescued from sex trafficking, in locations hidden in the remotest (and probably less glamorous) corners of the island. These communities were part of a network run by a priest who had asked my assistance to bring the sacrament of reconciliation to all their inpatients before Easter. I met hundreds of them individually, sometimes to hear their confessions, more often to listen to their heart-wrenching stories. They were at various stages in their process of healing which mostly consisted in learning how to name and own the abuse they had either endured or inflicted -in most cases *both* endured and inflicted- and find some level of peace with it.

I knew that in these situations there was little I could or *should* say. The listening does most of the work. And the *learning*. What was asked of me was not so much to bring comfort, and certainly not to give advice. No, what was asked of me was to play something akin to the role of a witness: they wanted someone who could acknowledge the glimmers of hope and renewal that had dawned into their lives – in places which had previously known only emptiness and despair.

And here comes the beauty I was hinting at earlier.

During these tours, for days, I saw *faces* which for years, often decades, had been disfigured by weariness, addiction-related illnesses, sadness, sometimes physical violence. And yet, according to their stages of healing, many of these women and men also radiated what I can only call a light, a serenity – something like the trust of a child, a level of acceptance, a newly discovered hope, which showed on their faces, changed them, and conferred to them a distinctive kind of beauty.

The marks that past sufferings have left of people' faces are indelible but it is as if, at the hands of an artist of genius, they are redesigned, softened, harmonized.

What I discovered in Sicily is that if faces can be *disfigured* by pain, they can also be re-configured, or, if you want *transfigured* by the healing power of hope, and start displaying a unique, unforgettable kind of beauty - the kind of beauty that does good to the heart of those who are given the privilege to be exposed to it.

This, I think, is the real meaning of the event in the life of Jesus and of his disciples we are celebrating today. We are often told that the reason why Jesus took Peter, John, and James with him on the mountain and was transfigured before them was to give them a proof of his divinity ahead of the trauma they were going to undergo when they would see him crushed, pierced, and bleeding to death, nailed on a piece of wood. We know though that if the expected result was to prevent their defection it failed miserably. No sooner things had turned ugly that all the disciples vanished, lost hope, hid, and even denied ever to have had anything to do with the disgraced would-be messiah.

Dazzling light, terrifying clouds, voices coming from nowhere can impress people for a while, but can't change hearts.

Just in the same way, according to the book of Exodus, there was no shortage of fireworks on the mount Sinai when Moses climbed it to meet God and descended from it bearing the good news that God wanted to make Israel his chosen people and establish a covenant with them. None of these glorious displays of power prevented the Israelites from falling into idolatry, doubting Moses, murmuring against God, regretting even to have left Egypt in the first place.

Whatever Peter, John, and James saw on that mountain, whatever we call *transfiguration*, is suggested - I believe- especially by what we are told of the faces of Moses and of Jesus: "As he came down from the mountain -we are told of Moses- he did not know that the skin of his face shone *because* he had been talking with God" (Ex. 34:29). As for Jesus, Luke says that "as he was praying, the appearance of his face changed" (Lk 9:29). Luke does not say *how* it changed, but when he mentions the presence of Moses as one of Jesus' interlocutors, we understand that there is a parallel between them - which explains why the liturgy puts these two passages side by side.

Jesus' face too was glowing - and for the same reason that explains why Moses' face was shining.

Of Moses Exodus tells us that "the Lord used to speak to him face to face, just as a person speaks to his *friend*" (Ex 33:11), and of Jesus we know that when he prayed, the Lord would call him "my Son" and that Jesus would call the Lord "Abba", that is "dad".

The faces of both Moses and Jesus shone, they were *transfigured*, because they had learnt how to come close to the real God, how to see him not as a terrifying divinity, a powerful ruler, an inflexible judge, but as *friend*, as *father* - they discovered a God who is caring and forgiving, patient and faithful, mysteriously vulnerable, eager to bring us comfort, renewal, and healing.

Few decades after the event described by Luke in this page, Peter reiterates that he did hear a "voice coming from heaven" while he was "with Jesus on the holy mountain", and declares that he was the "eyewitness of his majesty" (1:16ff). Interestingly though he points elsewhere as to the foundations of his faith and of his hope. He suggests that *we too* can live the experience of Moses and of Jesus, *we too* can be transfigured. All we have to do is learn, discover how to meet God as friend and as father, especially in the words of Scripture, which -he explains- is "a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts" (1:20).

The priest who asked me to go to Sicily was no bigot. He struck me as pragmatic and incredibly resourceful. As most Italians he *loved* good food and poured wine copiously. He was a formidable fundraiser. He had to be incredibly resilient to navigate a corrupt bureaucracy and get the necessary authorisations for the dozens of rehab centres he founded. I can't even imagine the length to which he must have had to go to shield from reprisals the people who turned to him for help, many with a criminal past. The mafia in Sicily has never been too kind towards those who highjacked its manpower and did not hesitate to murder even priests when they dared to challenge its grip on society.

Added to all this though, there was in this priest an extraordinary gift for bringing people from disfiguration to transfiguration.

Just as Peter say, the morning star had "risen in his heart".

What "morning star"? Well, I think, quite simply a sentence from Scripture: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Mt 25:40).

He had realized that God wants to bring us healing by caring for us as a friend and a father. He had learnt how to surround himself with countless other Christians who felt the same. During those trips I met many of these volunteers. All ordinary persons who simply cared, like this art teacher who volunteered to teach how to make pottery in one of the rehab centres I visited.

Thanks to them, the *transfiguration* was not just this one-off esoteric display of dazzling light which happened on a hill in Galilee two-thousands years ago.

Thanks to them, the transfiguration keeps happening now, it can be eye-witnessed on the faces of all the people who have been healed from the disfiguration brought by abuse, addiction, violence, abandonment, and destitution.

Just like the priest who invited me, none of these volunteers was a saint, nor a hero. Their only strength was the belief in the healing, the *transfiguring* power of caring for other people.

I grew up hearing of the beauty of Sicily, and I was not disappointed.

It is the beauty of the transfiguration.

We do not have to cross the though to see this same beauty. If we pay attention we will it hidden here in New York too – actually we can make this beauty, this transfiguration happen in New York too. The way of doing it is simply become ourselves friends, mothers, and fathers to others – become ourselves, like God, caring and forgiving, patient and faithful, compassionate, eager to bring comfort, renewal, and healing.

Then, yes, as Peter says, “the day will dawn and the morning star will rise in our hearts” (1:20) - in the hearts too.