

## TRANSFIGURATION - FR JOHN SPRING – SUNDAY 8 AUGUST 2010

Last Thursday was **The Feast of the Transfiguration**. Last Thursday was also **Hiroshima Day**. It is a terrible irony, and yet an important one, that the annual Christian remembrance of the transfiguration of our Lord in dazzling, divine light coincides with the world's remembrance of the destruction, in a blinding flash and a storm of incinerating fire, of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - men, women, youth, children and babies alike.

At the centre of both events was a burst of light. The one was a divine epiphany of great beauty, which vindicated goodness and truth and bore a bright shining promise of hope for our race. The other was a technological marvel and a human horror, bearing the threat of the searing and scalding, polluting and poisoning to extinction of all life, of all beauty and all goodness on planet earth. Here then we have two utterly different kinds of light.

Jesus, himself, drew a distinction between light which is light and light which is darkness. "If then," he said, "the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:28). The light which exploded out in the sky above Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a light which was truly darkness, while the light which transfigured Jesus on the mountain, so that his clothes became dazzling white, was true light. One was the glory of God and the light of heaven. The other was the dark glory of the devil and the light of hell.

The one was the light which shines in the darkness with such irresistible force that the darkness cannot overwhelm and extinguish it; the other is the darkness which smothers and extinguishes the joy of life and life itself. The one was the light given to all nations to give them hope. The other is a darkness which has descended on every nation and keeps us imprisoned ever since in the fear of nuclear holocaust.

Facing this is not an easy thing to do, and we often push painful realities like this away from us. Yet poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge – who, I must tell you, just escaped the appalling fate of being ordained a priest of the Church of England -- devoted a long poem to making this point: that, while we would rather occupy and distract ourselves with happy things, it is necessary to face our fears and to grow in wisdom, albeit at the cost of some happiness.

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", which I daresay you all read in school, an old seaman buttonholes a wedding guest on his way to the wedding. He tells him his harrowing tale and shares the wisdom that he has gained from his experiences. At last he says,

"O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been  
Alone on a wide wide sea:  
So lonely 'twas, that God himself  
Scarce seem'ed there to be.

O sweeter than the marriage-feast,  
'Tis sweeter far to me,  
To walk together to the [church]  
With a goodly company!

To walk together to the [church],  
And all together pray,  
While each to his great Father bends,

Old men, and babes, and loving friends,  
And youths and maidens gay!

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell  
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!  
He prayeth well, who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us  
He made and loveth all.”

The Mariner, whose eye is bright,  
Whose beard with age is hoar,  
Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest  
Turned from the bridegroom's door.

He went like one that hath been stunned,  
And is of sense forlorn:  
A sadder and a wiser man,  
He rose the morrow morn.

“A sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn.” So, if we face our fears about life, we may well end up somewhat sadder, but the promise in doing so is that we will also end up wiser, and better able to deal with the things that terrify and oppress us.

Yet nuclear holocaust is not the only issue which we must face. Whatever we must deal with in the world and in society, locally, nationally or on a global scale, we also need to bring home *to ourselves*, in our own lives, the distinction between light and darkness, between light which is light and “light” which, through powerful and brilliant, is darkness.

Because the world is spiritually dark, and evil abounds, we know that we need to seek the light of the Lord with all our hearts, and search for him while he may be found – that is, while we have enough light to find him. We are to strive, as children of light, to walk and to work while it is day, for, as Jesus says, times will come when darkness prevails and no-one can work. Yet more than that, when the days of darkness do come, as come they must, we must have the light of Christ safely and strongly shining so bright *within* us that, like John the Baptist, we will be for others “a burning and a shining light”, and “a lamp shining in a dark place”.

Happily, having been drawn to the light of Christ, having turned away from this world's darkness and come to Jesus and given our lives to him, we are no longer numbered among those who, as Jesus says, flee from the light. These are they who dread the light of truth and goodness lest their values, attitudes and behaviour be seen for what they are.

Yet, while God promises that he will not “quench a dimly burning wick”, it is often *we ourselves* who, like the foolish maidens waiting for the Bridegroom to arrive, fail to take enough lamp-oil and allow our lamps to go out. We are commanded, then, to have our lamps well supplied with oil, and to keep our lamp wicks trimmed, so that they burn brightly, and do not waste oil in producing dark smoke and little light. And we must do all this, not only for our own sake, that we might see our way

and be saved, but that we might “be given as a light to illuminate the nations”. We must also do it because, while *this is God’s world*, it is nonetheless in thrall to darkness, and the world as we experience it, within and without, in our lives and in the lives of others, is often a very dark place.

When those days come when the darkness closes in around you, when there is pain and grief and fear, when there is depression and despair, when life becomes almost too hard to bear, you need to know who the people are who have the light of Christ and the Word of God burning within them. And you need to know that, deep in your own heart, you have fostered the light which shines in the darkness, and which the darkness cannot overwhelm.

Sometimes this light shines out of us, we feel shiny and others will see it. At other times, this precious light will be like a secret treasure, a pearl not cast before swine. Of course, we *are* commanded to let our light so shine before others that they may see it, but *there are days when you simply are not up to shining*; when to shine would be untrue to what you are feeling and would be a pretence. (I am quite sure Jesus did not smile and look happy, happy, happy when he was being attacked and when he was being flogged.)

When these days come, and you just cannot shine and smile upon the world, you need to be able to go deep, down below the despondency and dispiritedness, and find the true light which illuminates everyone who is born of the light. You need to draw upon that light which shines more brightly on account of the darkness, and the secret that, in spite of all troubles, makes you smile in your heart.

I dare say you know the 19<sup>th</sup> century English novelist Thomas Hardy, and you know how dark his novels are for all their beauty. Perhaps you even had the courage (which I did not) to watch the recent televised version of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Hardy is certainly one of most famous melancholics of English literature. Yet he is also the author of a lovely poem which is an antidote to the dark. It is called “The Darkling Thrush”.

I first read this poem as a teenager and I didn’t understand it – that is, I knew what *the words* meant, but I couldn’t enter into the truth of the *experience* the poem describes. Now, somewhat older, and a good deal sadder and wiser than I was at eighteen, I believe I understand what Hardy has to say.

The poet is out walking and stops to lean on a gate. He feels the dark and cold of winter and the blast of a cold wind whipping amongst the leafless trees. We sense that he is burdened by the gloom of life. Then he hears a thrush singing as night falls, high in a leafless tree. He calls the bird a “darkling” thrush, that is a thrush singing in the dusk or “darkening” of the day, the way blackbirds do. Yet there is an implication of sadness – is the bird sad, or is it only the poet? At the same time, “darkling” also contains a play on “darling”, for the bird is also suddenly dear to the poet, a darling to him. But why?

Here is the poem, with which I will end. It begins all in a gloom, but wait for the third and fourth verses, and you will, I hope, understand why the darkling thrush became so dear to the sad-hearted poem. I also hope you too have reason to sing like the bird.

### **The Darkling Thrush**

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky      (woodbine)  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted night  
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy unlimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.