

Feast of the Transfiguration

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Angels just don't get it.

'Why do you seek the living among the dead?' They ask the disciples at the tomb. Like a tutor asking her tutees 'Why have you put this in the optative?'. Well, obviously, because we didn't know any better. Knowing everything is useful for almost everything - except compassion. For knowing how it feels to be at a loss, to not know. When the Lord says in today's gospel 'be not afraid, it is not quite the same as the angels' 'Be not afraid'. They say this, the angels, with genuine good-will. But there is a gap, that can't be bridged by sheer goodwill. The feeling of rising panic, the heart-race of excitement, sick-making anxiety, chilly dread. Angels know everything, but they don't feel. Only perishable vessels, only bodies feel.

Booths, says Peter at the transfiguration, let's build booths. The feast of booths, Sukkoth in Hebrew, recalls Israel's wandering in the desert, their living in tents. And for these eight days, Jews are commanded to live in temporary dwellings. You build a little hut, in the garden maybe, and it's enough if you eat all your meals there, though the devout and committed might sleep there, as well. Just for a week. In temporary dwellings.

Well, this is a good week to be addressing this congregation on the subject of temporary dwellings. But more seriously, let's ask what we can learn from temporary dwellings. How many did you walk past on your way from the car to Keble? Plenty of tents on St Giles these days, plenty on Broad Street, Cornmarket, the High. What about the man I met outside Mags one morning who'd spent hours of careful toil building a bender to live in with his girlfriend, in a field off the Botley Road. Until they got into an argument,

and she was angry, and she burnt it down with a cigarette lighter. Their home. What about the shanty towns and slums that a billion people live in. What about the Bed and Breakfast hostels where local authorities house thousands of people, families, often for months, even years, at a time. What about the tower blocks of poured concrete, never built to last, riddled with damp, which from Castlemilk to Thamesmead is all people have to raise their children. Oh, we rush to make donations after a documentary or a news report. But will we pay more taxes, demand better services, so that nobody has to live like that? What about the Calais Jungle, when it's been out of the news for a while? What about Grenfell Tower?

As in everything, the poor have it worst. We have the luxury of resenting our temporariness.

Students - and priests - are always complaining about how often they have to move. And their are genuine tragedies too. Homes have to be sold to

pay for care. People gamble, or drink away the money for the mortgage, houses flood and burn, moth and rust corrupt, thieves do break in and steal. Don't you hate camping? I do. Hard to believe I was ever a girlguide with my own patrol camping pennant. Hate it. The grime, the aches, the broken sleep. The discomfort. Not of being reminded that I live in a temporary dwelling, but of being reminded that I am one.

And that is our glory. The transfiguration is a blazing torch for the apostles, and what does it illuminate? The cross. And you cannot divide the two. This is the revelation on that mountain top: that the body revealed as glorified is a perishable body. These earthly bodies, Thomas Aquinas tells us, are given to us so we can come to know God, through our senses. But our resurrection bodies - they have no purpose. They are a sheer manifestation of glory. In the transfiguration, for that moment, Christ has both. What we are meets with what we will be.

And why? We are shown the transfiguration so that we may be transfigured. Here, at Mass, we, like the apostles, are shown the risen, ascended, glorified body of the Lord. We feast our eyes, our senses, our bodies, on that moment of utter reality. So that we can return to the path, the journey to the cross, go on trudging the Via Dolorosa of this life, but fed, fuelled - with hope.

There are only a few of us. God has chosen us, brought to his tabernacle for a reason. To be shown the Lord's glory, so we can be the world's hope. And we dare not shirk it. If Christians won't do it, who will? Who else will stand for hope in a crumbling house in Salford, full of peeling plaster and broken furniture, where a man dead from nothing but poverty is confined and lifted, one knackered dwelling being carried out of another. Hope, like a Caribbean woman in my old parish who the day after she discovered she'd been burgled threw a party for all her friends -

because - Thank God! - she and the kids were safe. Hope like a young woman I knew at Oxford whose anorexia was on the way to killing her, and she used to volunteer to clean rooms in a women's refuge. This girl couldn't find a home even in her own body. Emotionally she had nothing to give. But she could mop a floor, and lay clean sheets, and in this fleeting shelter make them feel that they mattered, these battered women and their traumatised children. Just for tonight.

People laugh at St Peter when he says 'let's build booths'. Silly St Peter. Zechariah prophesied that the kingdom would be celebrated with booths, so Peter must think it's already come. Does he think you can stay on the mountain, or that heavenly dwellers need earthly homes. But Moses and Elijah are not just the law and the prophets or types of man in glory. Moses and Elijah wandered in the desert, living in tents, hand to mouth, trusting. They showed their dependence on God precisely by their makeshift dwellings. And with

them? Christ. Born in a hut, dead on a gibbet, laid in another man's grave. Christ, who is God, and who chose the temporary dwelling of a body, and a poor one at that, thus to come from highest bliss down to such a world as this.

And why? To show us glory, and give us hope. Glory in the bleakest places and the frailest frames. Glory in things that are passing away, as the glory passed from Moses' face beneath the veil on the mountain. Glory in a baby for whom the only healing now is to be allowed to die. Glory in this image, which I found in an essay by an orthodox theologian: of a slum in Yemen, the lowest caste living in unimaginable squalor. And in front of it, a little girl, dressed in tatters, her arms outspread, a look of delight on her face, dancing.

If we would be transfigured, we must see the world transfigured first. We must see it as God sees it, and feel it as only bodies can. Compassion

is why God took a body, and it is why he gave us ours. Begin this morning, at this altar. Do you see just a wafer or do you see it transfigured: into the power, mysteriously gifted to us, to restore all that is lost and broken and dishonoured - all of it - to glory. See a body, a perishable vessel, glorified. Remember that a perishable vessel had to carry him and bring him to birth. Glorified, now, too. Believe that they wait in heaven, Christ and Mary both. They wait, at the hand of God, for us to look at how tender are the things God cherishes, to behold their glory, and to fall on our faces with awe.

Christ, have mercy upon us.

Our Lady, ark of the covenant, pray for us.

