

## The Transfiguration, Matins

### Exodus 24, 29-end and 2 Corinthians 3

#### Mother Emma

I am quite sure I am not alone in this congregation, as someone who has recently been to see Christopher Nolan's new film, *Oppenheimer*, depicting the development of the atomic bomb. If you haven't been yet, I shall attempt not to be a spoiler, but of course, we all know the final outcome of the story anyway: the devastating weapons of mass destruction, used to hasten the end of the Second World War, which offered a deterrent during the Cold War, but which still pose a potential long-term threat to our planet.

One thing which the film does not mention, and yet which strikes me with fresh and painful irony every time we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration, is that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on the same date on which the Christian Church traditionally remembers Jesus' Transfiguration on the mountain. In the account of both events, we hear of dazzling, blinding light, and of cloud, and yet one heralds death for tens of thousands, whilst the other promises eternal hope for us all through the glorious salvation which will be achieved on the Cross.

Perhaps it will always be impossible for us to celebrate the one without being reminded of the terrifying potential of the other.

A review in *The Guardian* of the film about *Oppenheimer* commented on the soundscape of drumming feet which accompanied first the triumph and glory of his discovery, but then was used again to indicate the sense of threat which he began to see as he realized the full catastrophic potential which it could have on the history of humanity. As he famously said of himself, "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds", we might be reminded that when humanity seeks to achieve the almighty power of God, we must always come back humbly to God to guide the ethical outcome of our own achievements.

In Matthew's version of the Gospel story, the disciples react to the brilliant light and the sound from heaven by falling on their faces in fear.

At the moment in "*Oppenheimer*" when the Trinity trial bomb goes off, the watching soldiers fall to their faces to avoid being blinded by the light, or injured by the terrible sound and aftershocks which follow, and one is very aware in both situations that there are some things which are just too much for the human body to bear. There comes a point where terror and awe seem to come very close together, and this moment in the film certainly opened up a new disturbing parallel for me.

Our Matins readings do not directly tell the story of the Transfiguration, which we heard at the Eucharist this morning – and if you don't remember it clearly, may I commend to you Martina's wonderful video of this narrative, made during lockdown and available via a link on the homepage of our website this week.

The readings for **this** service reflect more broadly on the theme of the glory of Christ revealed to the disciples.

The story in our first reading from Exodus, tells of Moses' descent from Mount Sinai, carrying the tablets of the Law – and the skin of his face shone as the result of his encounter with the glory of the Lord on the mountaintop. Those waiting for him are terrified by this evidence of glory – the result of a direct experience of God – and Moses covers his face with a veil.

Yet in the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the glory which has been achieved through Christ, and upon which we, as his followers, may look without a veil to shield us. He alludes to the story of Moses, and the fact that the Israelites were not able to look even upon the face of a man who had spoken with God, but in the glorification of Christ, he sees a way in which humanity has looked upon the glory of God directly.

Not only the disciples present at the Transfiguration have been privileged to experience this sight, but in Paul's view, all who are "*in Christ*" have been able to look upon the face of God. More than this, we are ourselves constantly being transformed into something more Christ-like, as the result of the Spirit within us.

He declares:

*All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*

The Western Church has had a tendency over the centuries to avoid engaging too deeply with the story of the Transfiguration, which seems to raise all kinds of questions about its literal interpretation – there is, in fact, no special provision for this Feast-Day in the Book of Common Prayer.

For the Eastern Orthodox, whose spirituality is more closely linked with icons and spiritual images, the mystery experienced on the mountain offers a sustaining glimpse of God's glory which can suffuse and nourish the human body and soul, offering a foretaste of our eternal hope.

In Paul's theology, our own experience of the Spirit and our knowledge of Christ's salvation bring us that glimpse of glory which can totally transform us. God's glory, radiant in splendour, far outshines even the most astonishing achievements of humankind.

Our own achievements are tinged with questions, with doubt, with the need for God's guidance – and if they are not, then they should cause us to be fearful in our own boldness.

As we consider today the ethical questions raised by Oppenheimer's discoveries and their uses, or, more topically, by the use of AI, if left unregulated and without profound reflection on its future use, we may be reminded by the glory of the Transfiguration of our own humility before God.

Our future lies in God's hands – as Paul says, "We have such a hope".

Let us be wary of placing all our hope in the material power of human achievement, and instead turn constantly towards the glory and guidance of God.