

TRANSFIGURATION (August 6)

In July last year, about 1.5 million young people came from all over the world to celebrate World Youth Day in Poland. In fact it was World Youth Week. They gathered in various parts of Poland for a week of catechesis, prayer, discussion and celebration before the main gathering in a field outside Krakow, which was designated the Field of Mercy. They came to this place, mainly on foot, on the night before and waited in vigil for the celebration of the Eucharist by Pope Francis on the following day.

Why on earth would so many young people spend so much of their holidays in uncomfortable circumstances, having catechism lessons, singing and praying together before the Blessed Sacrament? Pope Francis put it very simply and clearly: “We are all here because of one person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” All the sessions of prayer, teaching and celebration; all their meetings in friendship and fun were a lived experience of how Jesus Christ continues to live among us and invites us to share in his mission. Such a huge demonstration of shared faith helped them to believe and to say with Peter on the mountain of transfiguration: “Lord, it is wonderful for us to be here.”

I found myself thinking about a time in my life when I was rather younger and certainly much fitter! With friends we took part in the “Walk Against Want” – a leisurely stroll through the night from the Shrine of Remembrance in the city to Frankston. It was a fund raiser and we were going to alleviate World Poverty for ever. The enthusiasm, friendship and support of the participants – well, you could simply feel it!

At the time when Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain, he had reached a moment of crisis. Official opposition to Jesus was growing. When asked, “Who do you say I am?” Simon had answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” and this profession of faith had earned him the nickname Peter, “Rock” – “on this rock I will build my Church”. However, within a very short time, when faced with the prospect of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest and crucifixion, Peter was quick to dissuade Jesus from this course of action – “Lord, this must not happen to you” – which earned him the name “Satan”: “Get behind me, Satan..... the way you think is not God’s way but man’s”.

So now, six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain where he is transfigured in their sight. He was surely teaching them to think in God's way. They saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah, representing the teaching of the law and the prophets. They heard the voice of the Father: "This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him". It was such an overwhelming experience that, of course, they wanted it to last. They wanted to stay there. Their minds had been opened to the reality of what it means to say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But very quickly the vision was over and they were left alone with Jesus to go back down the mountain and continue on their way to Jerusalem and the cross.

Similarly, in Poland, the young people had been up the mountain. They had an extraordinary experience of faith. They heard the teaching of the Gospel explaining its relevance to their lives in the modern world. They prayed together. They worshipped God. They sang God's praise and they heard the voice of Pope Francis explain, "We are here because of one person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Surely those young people wanted the experience to go on and on, but in reality they had to come down from the mountain and return to everyday life, their personal way of the cross.

For the disciples, the wonder of the transfiguration soon wore off. When the crisis of Jesus' passion and death came, they were overcome with fear. They ran away and hid. And this, surely, is the reaction of many of us after an intense experience of faith? Whether it is an event like World Youth Day, our "Walk Against Want" or significant occasions in our life like Baptisms, First Communion, Confirmation, or Marriage, we are encouraged and enthusiastic as we prepare for and celebrate them. We promise ourselves that we will keep faithfully all that we have promised. Yet, so often, the enthusiasm soon wears thin and we become disillusioned. We forget what it is like to think in God's way. The attractions of daily life seem more appealing than fidelity to our faith. Or perhaps we don't see much light at the end of the tunnel especially in the Church. You know, at those times I do try to recall the good times and what it was – who it was -that prompted me to walk from Melbourne to Frankston!! And I reckon that that "remembering" is a good thing to do. In the dark times, we are called to allow the memory of our "mountain top" experience to rekindle our fire, to enable us to renew our decision to love and to follow

Jesus, no matter how hard it might be for us – knowing and believing that he always continues to walk with us.