

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 1 August 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Our first reading today contains one of the most famous, and for many one of the most puzzling, lines in the Bible.

“Vanity of vanities. . . All is vanity and a chasing after wind.” King Solomon, reputed to be the wisest human who ever lived, is saying that everything he has ever done or said or learned is futile, pointless, empty, meaningless. That is a harsh and discouraging idea. The wise King despairs as he realizes that all his wisdom will be left to those who may not understand it, that all his accomplishments may be forgotten or frittered away by those who come after him.

He is right, of course. We have no control over what those who survive us will do with what we leave behind. And if we put our hearts there into the permanent survival and thriving of our personal endeavors, our lives will be in vain and our hearts will despair. Even great cathedrals crumble. Great works of literature are sometimes lost. Fortunes are squandered or destroyed. Solomon is recognizing that everything changes, that everything in this world eventually fades away. As I read this, I was reminded of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s wonderful poem Ozymandias.

Ozymandias

by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

“Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” Despair, if you are following Ozymandias and trying to create for yourself some kind of permanent monument, something by which you will be remembered forever.

But our two New Testament readings show us another possibility. They remind us that the things that pass away are not all that is. In Christ we know something more real, more enduring than any statue or mountain. Our faith teaches us that Love is the most enduring, most real thing in the universe. It is only by attaching our lives and hearts to that reality, that we find ultimate meaning that transcends the vanity. We do not chase the wind, because the Spirit, the source of all wind, is already with us and needs no chasing.

It seems very appropriate that we have these readings about what is most real right before the Feast of the Transfiguration (this Friday, August 6). Transfiguration has long been an important and glorious celebration for the Church. Since 1945, it has also been a day of tragic remembrance. For on that Transfiguration Day an atomic bomb obliterated Hiroshima.

The Feast of the Transfiguration celebrates the possibility of glimpsing the eternal in the midst of the ephemeral, of experiencing the holy in the midst of the mundane, of seeing with our senses what our souls know to be true, that divinity underlies everything, that what is most real can be seen through the merely material.

If we consult the dictionary, we find that 'to transfigure' means primarily 'to change the outward form or appearance of' something'. Such changes are commonplace. People put on make-up or dye their hair. They paint houses or landscape them. The land is suddenly green again when a drought ends. An earthquake can transform a thriving city into a pile of rubble. Sixty-five years ago the face of the Japanese city of Hiroshima was utterly transfigured by the dropping of an atomic bomb.

Within this definition, transfiguration in itself is neither good nor bad; it is simply visible change. But because of the event celebrated in this feast, there is a second meaning for the verb 'to transfigure': which is 'to make glorious'. When Jesus was transfigured, it was as if a cloud passed from in front of the sun itself and suddenly the disciples saw him in his true and shining reality.

As I thought about Transfiguration and Solomon and Ozimandias, I recalled Huston Smith's book *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*, which he wrote out of a deep concern for what has happened to the human spirit. He believes that the fundamental problem with the so-called scientific or modern world view which states that matter is the foundation of all that is, that matter is the only thing which will never pass away, is that it misses most of what is.

Smith uses an image of one-way mirrors between the layers of reality. People who live entirely in a modern, matter-based world-view look up and see only a mirror, see the material world filled with humans reflected back at them. Those who live in the divine reality are able to perceive God and the whole spiritual fabric of the universe, as well as the whole material reality.

As people who worship God and acknowledge the spirit within ourselves and everything else, we are always aware of the divine dimension of reality; we know that it is the most real of all that is. But

most of us cannot always perceive it directly. We therefore prize the glimpses we are granted, the moments when the transfiguring window opens on what Smith likes to refer to as 'The Big Picture,' the divine basis of all reality, the divine glory which pervades all things.

This Big Picture affects how we view everything. Smith uses compassion as an example. He writes, 'The issue is not over compassion and an alternative of whatever sort, but over the status of compassion in the nature of things. Is compassion rooted in ultimate reality, or is it only an admirable human virtue? That is a vertical question pertaining to world views.' We consider ourselves called to compassion as a mirror of the compassion which is at the heart of God, at the heart of the structure of all reality. Others might consider themselves called to compassion by an idea, one among equally competing human ideas, which we are free to embrace or ignore. We see God in the compassion of others and in the suffering of others which evokes in us a mirror of divine compassion.

Each Transfiguration I recall Christobel Mattingly's wonderful tale of the transfiguring power of love lived out in the midst of suffering following atomic devastation. In *The Miracle Tree*, beautiful young Hanako goes to the city to join the war effort by working in a factory. There she falls in love with a young soldier named Taro. He is about to be sent into action and so they are unable to request proper permission from Hanako's mother before they marry. The traditional mother takes great offense and burns every communication from her disrespectful daughter, thus obliterating even the name of her son-in-law.

When the atomic bomb is dropped, most of Hanako's co-workers are killed, but she survives, no longer beautiful, scarred and disfigured, with much of her mind destroyed as well. Both her mother and her husband come to the flattened city to search for her, but without success. She does not remember her own name and so there is no record of Hanako in any of the hospitals. Eventually she is given a small apartment in which to live and slowly heal or die.

Hanako's mother stays in the city to help rebuild it, always hoping for word of her daughter, hoping for the opportunity to restore the love she lost. She joins a crew rebuilding a destroyed church and spends many years carrying bricks and mixing cement. Every night she folds paper cranes praying and hoping that Hanako is well. She brings her cranes, which embody her prayers, to the restored church.

Taro also stays in the city. After the rubble is cleared, he begins work as a gardener, striving to restore life and health to the seared landscape. He plants a small pine in the lot next to the destroyed church and tends it regularly.

Hanako's mother admires the strong young tree and compliments him on it whenever he comes to tend it. Over twenty years they come to value their encounters at the tree.

Each lives in hope of finding Hanako again, but they do not know that they share this connection. Hanako's apartment overlooks the young pine and from her window she watches it grow and watches the restoration of the church. Occasionally she hears the distantly familiar voices of her mother and husband, with no idea of who they are. As her mind begins to clear she writes poetry. The story ends with her making a paper crane of her last poem, a grateful tribute to Taro and his tree, and dropping it down to him.

Taro and the old woman then go up to Hanako's apartment. None of the three would be recognized by anyone else who knew them before the war, but because of their love and their long years of hope, they are able to recognize one another and to see the beauty that underlies and precedes all the disfigurement of injury and age. The triumph of love and forgiveness glitters with the glory of God, even in this setting of near total destruction.

The material world is continually transfigured by human destruction, as in the Gulf of Mexico today or in Hiroshima in 1945. Looking into the face of such devastation leads people to despair. But when we have the Big Picture, commended by Jesus and Paul and Huston Smith, we look beyond the vanity of pursuing material glory and permanence.

Like Taro, and Hanako, and Hanako's mother, we live in God's love and are able to recognize the glory of each unique individual, no longer (as Paul says) a representative of type or nationality, but unique in his or her own self. The disciples saw through the human teacher to the shining face of God. We can similarly see God everywhere, in every person, calling us to a life of love and purpose and meaning.

Let us pray: God of grace and glory, clear our eyes to see your light, enliven our hearts to feel your love, and strengthen our hands to serve all your children. Amen.