Sermon on the Last Sunday of Epiphany 2020

There’s a great scene in the recent Netflix show *The Crown*, in which the Queen Mother is vacationing on the coast in northern Scotland at a friend’s estate; it’s several years after the death of her husband, King George.

The cinematography is magnificent as it juxtaposes Scotland’s rugged windswept coastline with the this figure walking the beach in her grief and solitude. The existential statement is powerful. No one, rich, poor, powerful or weak is exempt from searing loss.

At some point the Queen mother glimpses a large estate in the distance, precariously perched right at the edge of a bluff. She hikes over and finds that the place is rundown; the place resonates with the grief she’s experiencing; she meets the owner and begins negotiations to buy the place.

Some visits later they are walking on the beach together back towards her friend’s estate when two royal officials, who’ve been desperately trying to find her, stumble down a sandy embankment in their loafers while trying to maintain their dignity, “mum may we please have a word.”

It’s at that moment that the penny drops and the gentleman who owns the precariously perched castle recognizes her.

Western civilization loves stories like this. We love the idea that there might be among us, someone who becomes famous, a secret princess or prince either already or in the making; and we’d be right, but more on that in a minute.

In societies influenced by the Christian faith, there is a deep irony, for we no longer remember the source of this fascination: in Luke after the resurrection two grief-stricken followers are “talking with each other about all these things that had happened…Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Or the more generalized conclusion of John’s gospel: “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.”

The season of Epiphany as a whole celebrates the inexpressible event present in this One with an ongoing eye to how his light is revealed in ways that respects our dignity to either accept it, ignore it, or indeed, forget that it exists.

But Epiphany is more than this, more than how we come to awareness of God, it’s also about how we might yet come to *be* what is revealed, to not only recognize the One among us in quite shocking ways but then, by the mystery of this One’s presence become in ourselves what He came to reveal.

And so it makes sense that the story of the Transfiguration has become the story that we would look at on the last Sunday of Epiphany season.

It is both the epitome of the “light stories:” from the star that led the Magi to the extraordinary phrase that Jesus flung at his ragtag followers: “you are the light of the world.”

It’s the penny-dropping moment that opens doorways to the past and to the future.

To the past: with all the difference that Jesus makes, at the transfiguration Moses and Elijah appear beside him: the Law and the Prophets.

However misunderstood, however much fear the giving of the Law instilled in the Israelites, this was a moment of God’s glory, by which we mean, God’s closeness to humans, a revelation of loving intent.

The giving of law, of God’s law in particular, is the beginning of culture: it removes us from our animal survival mode that pits everyone against everyone.

To be able to know that rest is required of everyone on the seventh day, that parents are to be respected, that commitments are meant to be kept is the foundation of a life that can be lived in new freedom to create, because now we’re not always looking over our backs.

That’s the theory and to a large degree, we Canadians are a beneficiary of a vastly improved life because of the rule of law.

Jesus’ transfiguration was a penny-dropping moment for the first followers because they would have remembered the stories of Moses’ own shining face. Jesus does not stand in contradiction to his Jewish past but as one who has come to expose how the heart can be transformed in order that God’s intentions might yet come to fruition;

that the full Spirit of the law, which is love, might be expressed over and against those who use even good laws to take away opportunities, who don’t use the law to build a society of God’s Loving Justice.

A door to the present: the magi may have wanted to stay in the hut with the toddler and the Holy Family, but no sooner have they presented their gifts when they are warned that their journey was not over and that from now on it wasn’t going to be friendly but dangerous!

Here on the mount Peter too, wants to revel in the revelation, wants to hold on to the moment; the sheer amazingness of it all; understandably so!

But right here at the moment when it would seem that Peter was right; this is the moment we should hold onto we read that it is only a bridge!

Only a doorway to living in God’s presence in the present; only a sign of what will come as we keep listening to the Beloved.

In the contemplative prayer tradition we are taught not to get too caught up in ecstasies, these will pass and not too down in sorrow, this too is merely a constellation of feelings, it too is not our destiny.

God’s presence in our present gives us fresh courage to live, to go down off the mountain into the vagaries of daily life, to keep our wits about us and not overreact one way or the other: we are the beloved of the Beloved and therefore we *can* listen; He is the Light of the world, just so you and I are light for the world.

It’s tough to say but try it once a day: I am God’s beloved; I am not the Light, but in His Light, I am a light for my family, for my neighbourhood. Gulp! “I am love, I am light.”

The Transfiguration opens a door to our future: In terms of Jesus himself, we see this to be true; God is determined, and so is Jesus, that he go to Jerusalem and face what needs to be faced alone, so that all our false stopping points, all those points where we want to indulge ourselves in false security and false hope can finally be exposed.

God seems determined to expose all our victimizing and all victims so that not only a few, like Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Jesus and Peter are privileged with spiritual experiences but that all of us, the whole world may yet find themselves in this story!

Certain gnostic sects wanted the Transfiguration to be *the* climax of the Christian story; but though it foreshadows the divine desire it is not the path itself.

This event is a doorway to that path, a path that is both paradoxical and yet true to the human journey: a journey we traverse during Lent

Here on this mountain Jesus is revealed in glory; there on the hill Jesus will be revealed in shame.

Here his clothes are shining, there his clothes will be stripped from his body caked in blood.

Here he is flanked by the law and the prophets, Moses and Elijah, there by two criminals.

Here light, dazzling from within and above a bright cloud bathes the scene, then and there a deep darkness will come upon the land.

Here Peter stutters how wonderful things are: then he will be cursing that he doesn’t know Jesus

Here the voice of God affirms what was said at Jesus’ baptism; then Jesus will express the shock of forsakeness.

This story shows us that “success” is not the end; and that’s good news because most of us don’t live a fairytale. The grand glorious trajectory of the gospel is that God lives our pain and suffering with us opening up a path of healing, hope and transformation not by escaping our troubles but in and through them!

We are the ones through whom this Gospel shines, not by everything and in everything done right, but in our embrace of love, forgiveness and the willingness to walk with each other.

We are not solitary princesses walking the beach, alone in our grief but at this Table, the penny drops, in his gift our eyes and ears are opened to our each other: daughters and sons of the True King by Grace, we’re all part of *the Crown*.