

“In The Afterglow” – Luke 9:28-43 (Transfiguration Sunday)

Well, I almost wasn't here this morning. Or perhaps it was a different Sunday that I almost wasn't here – I can't be sure because it didn't happen. It almost happened, though, and that was enough to get me dreaming again. What's that? What was it that almost but didn't happen? A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fly an airplane trans-Atlantic. I had a call recently from my long-time and very good friend Richard who used to keep my Aztec flying (yes, I used to own an Aztec, a twin-engine, six-seat airplane), and Richard told me that we had just missed out on flying another Aztec from Milan, Italy to Earlton in Northern Ontario. One of his customers has just purchased this airplane, and wanted us to fly it home for him, but as it turned out the seller offered to do it for a price that was simply too low to refuse. (Besides, if the seller of an airplane is prepared to strap it on and fly it across the Atlantic in February then the buyer is well assured that the condition of the airplane has been properly represented during the sale!) It was disappointing, because this particular Aztec is probably the best one of its kind flying – compared to the 'bucket of bolts' that I used to terrorize the local citizenry with, this one was a Space Shuttle.

Oh well, it didn't happen, but it did get me dreaming about flying again. Flying has always been one of my great loves – of all the things in life that I wanted to do, becoming an airline pilot was perhaps the greatest of the unfulfilled. I haven't flown as pilot for over ten years now, and it has only been in the last few years that I have flown even commercially, but the thrill, the magic is as great as ever. It is hard to describe to someone other than another pilot the sheer exuberance of climbing up through the clouds, and bursting out on top into the sunshine and clear blue sky. You feel totally separated from the mere mortals chained to the earth below, for whom this glorious light is but a memory. My soul resonates with Antoine de Saint Exupery, a pilot who pioneered the mail routes over the Andes Mountains in rag wing biplanes in the 1920's and who wrote the enchanting book 'Night Flight' to try to describe the experience. Richard Bach, who wrote 'Jonathon Livingston Seagull', is another pilot-author who comes very close to truly putting the experience of flight into words that others can feel.

I know I have to be careful here, because I have slowly and painfully discovered I can easily offend people when I get ecstatic about flying. In a moment of incaution many years ago I pronounced that “for pilots, life consists of a few glorious moments aloft, separated by long periods of boredom trapped on the ground”, a statement that was not well received. And while I wouldn't dare to declare flying as the equal of the kind of experience that the disciples had on the mountain top, there are moments in flying that provide at least a peek into that kind of mountain-top experience. (There are other moments in flying when you feel like you're about to meet God face-to-face, like those times you're pushing the limits shooting a night ADF instrument approach with the clouds down on the deck and the rain obscuring everything and the wind is acting up and you can't find the runway lights for love nor money, but here we're going to stick to the glorious moments up in the bright light!)

I can't read this account of the Transfiguration without having a great deal of sympathy for the disciples. They have been drawn into direct contact with the true glory of God in an encounter that leaves them speechless. Poor Peter does manage to blurt out an offer of faithful hospitality, and under the circumstances that is miracle enough, for how could anyone know what to say during or even after an experience such as this one? To be sure, they'd spent a lot of time with Jesus, and they had even been witnesses to the strange voice at his baptism several years ago, and they had seen with their own eyes how he had cured even the lame and the blind and the lepers, but they'd never even dreamed of a moment like this one. High on a mountain, dozey with lack of sleep, and all of a sudden they break through their cloud layer. The face of Jesus changes, and even his clothes glow in an indescribable light, and he begins chatting with two newly-appeared figures who can only be Moses and Elijah, the

very definition of the Law and the Prophets. Who could begin to describe such an event? Who would even dare to talk about it afterwards? It's no wonder that Luke reports that the disciples kept it to themselves – wouldn't you have kept mum about it, for fear of being committed to the nearest institution? It's a good thing there were three of them to be witnesses of this event, as any fewer wouldn't have met the legal quorum of witnesses, and would have put them in jeopardy.

But as if all that wasn't enough to jangle the minds of the disciples, the climax certainly must have stunned them. Once again they heard the voice of God proclaiming that Jesus was truly the Son of God, his Chosen One, his beloved. The last time they heard that divine proclamation was at his baptism. It was only three years ago, but seems like a lifetime, as so much had gone on in the meantime. The baptism was the beginning, and the voice had confirmed the truth of what was to come. Now Jesus had just forecast for them how it would end tragically, and here was the voice once again. Could this be confirmation of the truth of what he had told them about how the Son of Man would suffer, and die, and be raised again on the third day? Too horrible to contemplate, too awful to even think about, and more than the disciples could bear.

And then the silence. Silence as you find only on a mountain top, broken only by the gentle whisper of the wind bearing untold past secrets and yet-to-be-dreamed dreams.

But silence never lasts. Even if the impact of mountaintop experiences last, the experiences themselves also end. And thus it was with this stunning experience for the disciples, and it was time to come down the mountain, back into the valleys of real life, and the vignette that Luke paints for us as Jesus and his disciples come back down off the mountain is such a profoundly real happening that it puts the stamp of authenticity on the whole event.

Fresh from a divine and holy encounter with the two most defining figures of the Law and the Prophets, from a face-to-face meeting with Moses and Elijah, ears still ringing with the affirming voice of God, Jesus and the disciples come directly into the din of the unruly mobs of people, all clamoring for relief. "Help us", they cry to Jesus. "We asked your disciples to help us, and they couldn't, or wouldn't". Whether the disciples were still stunned by the enormity of what had just happened, or whether they were totally self-absorbed in reliving the experience for themselves, basking in the afterglow, we can never know (until, of course, we meet them and ask them!), but whatever the reason they were not able to satisfy the noisy demands of the crowd, and so it fell upon Jesus.

Can we understand why he was a bit testy at this point? Can't we cut him a little slack because he has just discussed with Moses and Elijah what was to come for him in the very near future, what the path would look like to the cross, to death and beyond? Can't we have a bit of compassion as he snaps at them with what surely sounds like frustration with "you faithless and perverse generation, how much longer do I have to be with you, and put up with you?" His retort sounds so harsh, so unlike the ever-smiling picture that people like to impose upon him. It is harsh, and the very harshness of it rings true from the gospel pages.

But the event didn't end with harshness. Jesus didn't stomp off away from the crowds, leaving them disappointed and hurt. With the infinite compassion that filled him, he healed the boy who had been brought to him, casting out the demon with but a word, and sending him on his way cured, and full of life, and "all were astounded at the greatness of God". And as we know, the disciples pulled up their socks, and although they faltered a few more times, stopped basking in the afterglow of this profound event and accompanied Jesus in his journey to the cross, were witnesses to his resurrection, and proclaimed his word of grace and mercy until they were themselves granted entry into the eternal presence of Moses, Elijah, and all the saints.

That little incident that puts such a stamp of authenticity on the profound event of the Transfiguration also provides us with a profound model for our own discipleship. Many today within

the Christian faith want to remain basking in the afterglow of their mountaintop experience of discovering that Jesus is the Son of God. Both in worship and in their daily lives they seek to relive over and over again the high point of their initial intimate contact with God, humming to themselves how they and Jesus walked in the garden alone. They seek to remain firmly on the brightly-lit mountaintop, listening for a thunderous voice to reassure them of the rightness of their revelation, at the same time unable to hear the cries of the people down in the shadowy valleys crying for comfort, for food, for sustenance, for acceptance, for reassurance, for life.

If we have heard the message that Jesus is the Son of God, if we wish to model our lives after his in response to his call to become one with him, we need to come down off the mountaintops, to walk with him among the people clamoring for his love and affection. We live in the afterglow of the discovery of God's love for us in Christ Jesus, but we are called to do more than bask in that afterglow. We are called to let that warm, loving light shine forth; to hear the cries of people desperately searching for meaning and acceptance and freedom from the demons that seek to destroy them and to bring the healing word and love of Christ to them.

As pretty as the earth appears from space, we cannot remain there. As comfortable and even as inspiring as a mountain top is, we cannot remain there. As warm and snugly as the first realization that God loves us enough to send his Son to rescue us is, we cannot remain there. The world is mostly valleys, and plains, and hollows, and uphill, and is filled with noise and commotion and demanding people, and that is where we will spend most of our time. To be sure, there will always be more mountaintop moments, indeed we all face one day a very exciting ultimate mountaintop experience of being reunited with the saints, but until that day we are called to live out our lives living out our faith in the afterglow, proclaiming and demonstrating the love, the forgiveness, the grace, the mercy so miraculously given to us first by God in Christ Jesus his Son, through whom we offer all thanks and praise.