

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen

“Hear the Voice from Heaven”

Luke 9: 28 – 36

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is a great honor and privilege for me to be invited to share the Word of God in this blessed congregation in Paris. I bring you the greetings of your sisters and brothers in Christ from Jerusalem and the Holy Land. We ask you to continue to pray for our steadfastness in faith in the midst of political instability and the ongoing conflict. We thank you for the prayers and accompaniment for Palestinian Christians and for the cause of justice in the Holy land.

Today we hear the story of the Transfiguration, which occurs about halfway through the public ministry of Jesus. Jesus was accompanied by his three disciples, Peter, James and John when ascends the mountain of Tabor. St. Luke emphasizes that Jesus was

spending his time in prayer, and this intense time of prayer resulted in this moment of transfiguration.

I wonder: If this experience of transfiguration would happen today, how would the public react? What would be the social media response? The media would surely have wanted to broadcast this event live, for otherwise many would doubt that it happened. Perhaps some would say this religious experience reminds them of Sufism. But this miraculous event was not so unique. The history of religion teaches us that the intense prayers, and devotion of committed believers and mystics are often accompanied by physical transformation and a luminous glow, which imparts a living message. If some of you have spent time deep in prayer, perhaps you also experienced moments of transfiguration.

Luke's account of the Transfiguration of Jesus is by the public confession of Peter. "Jesus said to the disciples in Caesarea, but who do you say I am? "Peter answered: "The Messiah of God." (Lk 9:20-21). Jesus, in response to Peter's confession, made a threefold disclosure: that the Messiah of God must suffer, that his disciples must be prepared to share His suffering, and that his suffering and theirs must be seen against a background of ultimate and certain glory. This means that the disciples have already had a preview of the glory to come, and an invitation to come and follow the Son of God. The voice of God on the mountain only affirmed this prophecy and invitation.

As Luke the Evangelist describes, the vision of transfiguration on Mount Tabor was very remarkable. "While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and

his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly, the same two men, Moses and Elijah talking to Him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure (exodus) which the was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” (29-31).

It is fascinating to see in how many respects the experience of these two great servants of God matches the experience of Jesus. When Moses came down from the mountain of Sinai, he did not know that the skin of his face shone (Ex 34:29). Both Moses and Elijah had their most intimate experiences of God on a mountaintop. It was into Mount Sinai that Moses went to receive the law. (Ex 31:18). It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah found God, not in the wind nor in an earthquake but in the still small voice (1King 19:9-13). It is also strange that there was something awesome about the deaths of both Moses and Elijah. The Book of Deuteronomy (34:5+6) tells us of the lonely death of Moses on Mount Nebo. It reads as if God Himself was the burier of the great leader of the people. As for Elijah, he took his departure from the astonished Elisha in a chariot and horses of fire (2 King2:11).

The two figures on the mountaintop represent Law and the prophets. As they appeared to Jesus, he was setting out to Jerusalem, where many great ones died. Furthermore, it was consistent with Jewish belief that Elijah was the forerunner and herald of the Messiah, and it was believed at least among some Jewish teachers that when the Messiah came, he would be accompanied by Moses.

These two figures, Moses and Elijah are the twin peaks of Old Testament history and achievements. These two figures rose up in the Transfiguration and pointed to Jesus

on His way. In them, the history recognized Jesus as its own consummation. The greatest of the law- givers of the greatest of the prophets recognize Jesus as the one of whom they have dreamed and as one foretold. The appearance of those two greatest human figures witnessed to Jesus that he is the Only True Messiah. He is the true suffering servant as Isaiah called Him. They bode him to go out on his adventurous exodus, to save humanity of their sins on Calvary and the voice of heaven confirmed that: "This is my son, my chosen, listen to him."(35)

Thus, the transfiguration must be seen as a mix of glory and the cross. Suffering and promises of judgment intertwined. The cross and the Glory of God are not at odds.

In this very special transfiguration, what was the reaction of Peter? Peter was overwhelmed by this Holy moment, and therefore he wishes to make a booth, a tent, a Tabernacle, perhaps referring to the Jewish Festival of Tabernacle (Sukkot) by which to offer lodging for these historic and significant religious figures. Peter suggests to make three booths: "one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah" he said. His desire is to preserve this holy event and to capture something of magnificence of that holy moment. However, while he was saying this; a cloud came and overshadowed them... Then from the cloud came a voice that said: 'This is My Son, My Chosen, listen to Him!' (34+35)

Isn't Peter's reaction a very typical approach of human beings? We do not understand the very message of that moment. We love to create booths, or tabernacles, that would separate people and create division. We see this in every aspect of life. Nations want

to be separated and live in their own spaces. Wars are launched to secure the narrow boundaries of the nation. National security is more important than justice or our common well-being. Prejudice against other religions or cultures is seen as normal. We certainly prefer to live within our own religious booth. This is the reason, when we plan to build booths of security, the result is we live in booths of selfishness, and we create hatred of those who are different.

My fear is that anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, Christian persecution and other fears are growing because we want to build our own booths and separate ourselves from others. The lesson of Transfiguration is to pull down any booth of separation and to find the common values in all religions that promote justice, living together, diversity, peace, and acceptance of the other. Only then we can work for the common well-being of every nation and every human in the world.

The call of unity is very clear for us as Christians. We are naturally like Peter, hoping to build booths and forgetting to listen to the voice of Jesus. But like Peter, now we have heard the voice from heaven asking us in our different churches and different nations not to build walls or booths on the mountaintop, but rather to be united in a reconciled diversity, together co-creating God's Kingdom on earth as in heaven.

It is said that the twentieth century was the century of the ecumenical movement. It seems that the Holy Spirit has actively worked in all of our Churches to hear the voice of heaven that calls us to listen only to Jesus. He is the fulfilment of prophecy. Thank

God for all the mothers and fathers in faith that brought us to witness such a unity in a reconciled diversity in the one Church of God.

In 2016, the Lutheran world federation and the Holy See co-hosted a joint worship service to commemorate 500 years of Reformation. A common worship was co-hosted by Pope Francis, me (the President of LWF) and the General Secretary of LWF, Rev Martin Junge. It was a very historic and moving common worship of thanksgiving, repentance, and commitment in the Lutheran Cathedral in Lund, Sweden. Above all else, together we witnessed to the belief that what unites us is greater than what divides us.

However, one day earlier, the Sunday prior to our joint service, I was invited to worship at Lund Lutheran Cathedral celebrating the Reformation with the regular Sunday congregation. Following the Liturgy of the Holy Communion, something special happened. Just before the closing hymn, we suddenly saw the Catholic Dean of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Parish in Lund entering the Cathedral carrying the Vatican flag, an icon of Virgin Mary, and accompanied the entire local Catholic congregation. Together, they processed to the altar of the Lutheran Cathedral and joined the congregation in shared songs and prayers. As we Lutheran and Catholic clergy gathered around the altar of God, I have never seen faces so elevated and happy.

Everyone, including myself, had tears in our eyes. It was like a dream. Many in the Church were amazed. It reminded me of the Day of the Pentecost when the disciples were amazed with what was happening in front of their eyes. Later, some observed

that the ecumenical joint worship co-hosted by the Pope, myself of the General Secretary would have meant very little if the local people had not embraced it fully.

That day, we were truly on the Mount of Transfiguration. But we were not there to erect booths, as Peter desired. We were there to tear down walls. We were there to say farewell to every wall of hatred, prejudice and division and to hear the voice from heaven saying: "This is My Son, the Chosen, listen to Him". Thanks be to God, we have learned to see the living Christ in our sister churches, and together we have promised to proclaim the Gospel of love to the whole world.

There is a story about a believer in Christ who was listening with rapt attention to an agnostic astronaut who was bragging about their discovery of modern astronomy. After a while, the believer turned to him and simply said: "Yes it is true. You folks look through instruments which science created and see millions of stars. But, I look up and see only few stars but behind them, I see the Living God.!"

The story of transfiguration challenges us as it challenged Peter. It asks us this Lent to listen to Christ, the Messiah, our Redeemer. It challenges us to be living witnesses for Jesus when we come down from the mountain, and together proclaim the Gospel of Love to the world. It challenges us to think about new ways to be unified as different churches, different nations, and different peoples. Above all, in the midst of all that is happening in the world today, from COVID to climate change to the crisis in Ukraine, to listen carefully for the voice of God, who assures: "This is My Son, My Chosen, your Redeemer, listen to Him."

Let the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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