

**Sermon for the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ, August 6,  
2017**

**Solemn Mass**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Exodus 34:29–35; Psalm 99:5–9; 2 Peter 1:13–21; Luke 9:28–36*

The story of the transfiguration appears in Mark, Matthew, and Luke.<sup>1</sup> You'll recall that Matthew and Luke have Mark in front of them when they write; but each uses Mark to tell his own story, not Mark's. That said, Matthew is generally closer to Mark than Luke is—Luke is always looking forward to his second book, the Acts of the Apostles.

Matthew and Luke follow the order of Mark's gospel in placing the story of the transfiguration after Jesus has spoken to the twelve for the first time about his death and resurrection. The twelve have heard him say, "Whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it."<sup>2</sup> And then Jesus he says "I tell you truly there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."<sup>3</sup> Three of twelve do see the kingdom of heaven—in Luke, eight days later.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:2–8; Matthew 16:24–28.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:24b.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:27.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 9:28.

Generally speaking, the twelve disciples come off best in Luke. Mark likes, in the words of the late Raymond Brown, “to dwell on their failures and weaknesses.”<sup>5</sup> But in Mark and Matthew, three of them, Peter, John, and James, get to see the sudden change in Jesus’ person and clothing, his transfiguration. In Luke the disciples climb the mountain with Jesus and fall asleep. Jesus prays. His person and his clothing are changed. Moses and Elijah appear. In Luke alone, Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about his “exodus”—his departure—the death and resurrection that lie ahead for him in Jerusalem.

When Peter, John, and James finally awake, they see Jesus’ transfigured glory, and they see Moses and Elijah. Peter’s words about making huts show that he doesn’t understand that he is in the presence of the kingdom of God.

The cloud appears and frightens the three. Mark and Luke describe no response either to the cloud or the words that are spoken, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.”<sup>6</sup> I like Matthew here. In his gospel the

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week: Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 9:35.

disciples fall down in worship. (Wouldn't you?) Jesus goes to them, touches them, and says, "Rise, and have no fear."<sup>7</sup> Luke simply says, "And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone."<sup>8</sup>

Matthew and Luke follow Mark's lead about what happens next, too: Jesus heals a boy who is possessed by an evil spirit whom the disciples who had not gone up the mountain with Jesus could not heal.<sup>9</sup> None of his disciples understand who Jesus is.

Matthew and Luke sum up the story of healing with words from the other text that Matthew and Luke share, generally called "Q," from the German word *quelle*, meaning "source." It's also known as "the Sayings Source,"<sup>10</sup> Jesus said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this . . . tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 17:6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 9:36.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 17:14–21; Luke 9:37–43a.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 17.6.

There are seven large boxes of photographs from my late mother and stepfather's house in the rectory. My siblings get regular warnings from me about the need for us to sort through them. I know that when we do, there will be many laughs, many embarrassments, and, I hope, more joy than sadness. I know that sadness and other strong emotions will be with us.

My siblings and I all grew up going to church Sundays with our parents. My sister and brother never continued going to church after they left home. None of my four nieces have been taught how to pray by their parents. I know our stepsister's family has long been active at Trinity Church, Copley Square, in Boston. Of the ten of us who are first cousins and who all grew up going to church, I think that only three of us are active in a church community.

I wonder if my sister and brother will return at some point to faith in Jesus Christ, to hope in eternal life. When we finally get to those boxes of photographs, there will be plenty pictures of us being at church, getting dressed up for church at Easter. If they ask, I'll be happy to share how our parents' deaths have changed my faith—but only if they ask. We do speak to each other about missing them and missing the

phone calls that were so much a part of our adult lives away from home. They both know our mother and her brothers went to church all through their lives.

In my quiet prayers I'm continuing to think about words I mentioned last month that were written by an English priest, Canon Donald Gray, in a short article called, "The Real Absence: A Note on the Eucharist."<sup>12</sup> It was a reflection on how Jesus Christ is really present and also really absent in our lives in this world.

He wrote that there is a difference between living for the future, for a goal, and living "from the future"<sup>13</sup> that God has made for us, that we already share in this world. I believe you and I are living from the future by God's grace for the larger life of the world to come

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<sup>12</sup> Donald P. Gray, "The Real Absence: A Note on the Eucharist," *Worship* 44 (January 1970, 20–26).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

that he has planned for us with all of our sisters,  
brothers, mothers, fathers.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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