

Transfiguration (Aug. 6, 2006)

Wounded Warriors

In our first reading today we hear Peter telling us he was on that mountain top as an eye witness of the majesty of Jesus revealed in his transfiguration. He heard the Father claim Jesus as his Son with whom he is well pleased and tell us all, "Listen to him." Peter then goes on in what might seem an uncharacteristic mode for Peter. You would do well, he says, to be attentive to this prophetic word, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. We would not expect the Peter we know from the Gospels to speak with such poetic language. It's an indication, perhaps, that this was a transfiguring moment not just for Jesus, but for the disciples who were with him as well: Peter, James, and John.

And it seems to me that if this incident is to have some meaning for us we must think of transfiguring or transforming moments in our own lives, moments that perhaps indicate the future projection of our lives, just as this moment points beyond the Passion and death of Jesus to his resurrection, to the glory that shines forth in this revelation on a hill-top.

What are the transforming moments of our lives? For many, if not most of you, the day you were married, for me my ordination, for someone else the choice of a career.

I would like to spend a few minutes sharing with you some transforming experiences that I was privileged to be part of this summer.

Many of you, I think, are familiar with the work of Brother Rick Curry, a Jesuit of the Maryland province who runs the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped. This is an effort to help disabled people to develop talents that they perhaps never suspected they had, to give them a better sense of self worth and to understand that they are not second-class citizens even if they cannot do all the things that able-bodied people can do. There are many transforming moments in their experiences at the workshop as they discover hidden gifts and abilities that help them to rise above their disabilities and express themselves in acting, singing, yes, even

in dancing.

This summer in the town of Belfast, Maine, where Brother Curry conducts a summer program, a special project is even now going on called Wounded Warriors. Brother Curry has gathered a group of veterans who have been wounded in Iraq, Afghanistan, and a couple even from Vietnam, and has them writing about their experiences. The pieces they write under the direction of professional writing teachers will be performed at a gala presentation at the end of the summer session. In most cases the performances will be done by the veterans themselves

It was my privilege to be with them during a part of the program. I had a chance to talk socially with all of them and more personally with some who sought me out because they wanted to talk with a priest. Their stories are extraordinary and believe me they have many stories to tell.

I would like to make clear that there is no political agenda here. The point is not to decide whether these wars are right or wrong. Rather it is to provide a healing atmosphere and experience. Interestingly some of them felt that it took almost as much courage to come to Belfast, Maine, as to join the Marines or the Army and go to Iraq or Afghanistan. They did not know what to expect. Some who accepted back out at the last minute. One marine who did come was blinded by shrapnel and said he was hesitant at first because the Marines is a very alpha-male environment. I am quoting him now. "I never thought of myself as an artistic person. I never liked acting." But still he was intrigued by the opportunity. This, he said, is completely different from anything the VA offers, and now I want to write a book. All of these veterans, like this one, have had some very profound transforming experiences. Their wounds changed the direction of their lives, and now their writing is changing it again. I listened to them present their writings. Some of them were sad. Some were funny. All of them were moving – profoundly so. At moments I found myself weeping as I listened. It was transforming for me, too.

In the Gospel story of the Transfiguration after God the Father claims Jesus as his beloved Son, he tells the disciples, "Listen to him." He tells us that as well. Listen to him and do what he tells us to do. Basically that means be loving, compassionate, understanding, forgiving people.

Listen to him. Open our minds and hearts. But of course opening our

minds and hearts to God also means opening our minds and hearts to one another. Listen to him because Jesus is speaking to us all in many ways, not just in the words of sacred scripture, but also in the events that television broadcasts in our homes every day: continuing war in Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel; struggles in Africa and Asia; Super Bowls and Academy Awards; hunger and homelessness on the streets of Washington. Speaking to us through our own experiences: a new-born baby or a child with Down's syndrome, a wedding or a funeral, hostility at home or crisis in the church, a job you love or a job you've lost. Listen to him as I did speaking through wounded veterans as they told their extraordinary stories.

And as I listened to these wounded veterans I could not help but feel that God was saying to them what he said to Jesus, "You, too, are my beloved sons and daughters. I love you very, very much."