Glory and Ignominy     Transfiguration of the Lord/B     Sunday, August 6, 2006
5:00 p.m.    Dn 7:9-10, 13-14;    2 Pt 1:16-19;    Mk 9:2-10 (Our choice of destiny)

All religions appeal to a reality not seen. Today’s story is of the apostles glancing just for a moment into the real world, a world that they, like us, rarely glimpse, but people do! The soul can see the light, which is God, although we usually don’t, and it doesn’t last very long, but it has been reported many times in history. Jesus embodied the light, which is God. That is why in our Creed we profess that Jesus is “Light from Light, true God from true God.”

We might wonder why the apostles had been with Jesus for so long and never saw into this reality, but they were prohibited, just as we are prohibited. On the one hand, we can say rightly that the body of Jesus, the humanity of Jesus, revealed the nature of God, and in one sense that’s true, but in another sense it hid the reality of God also. And it’s in just this kind of ambiguous world that we live: God is revealed to us and hidden from us at the same time. The lesson here is meant for all of us, not just for the apostles. What we see is not what we get. A discriminating, spiritual person becomes skeptical of reality in terms of appearances; that is, appearances are not fully real; they are just appearances. We touch, we see, and we hear only the surface of reality. It’s real, but it’s the surface only. This is what we celebrate on today’s feast, the feast of the Transfiguration.

Now a strange confirmation of this comes from, of all places, modern science, especially physics. According to nuclear physicists and particle physicists, matter is not solid at all, although it seems to be. We sit on and stand on magnetic fields, not solid objects. They are not solid. The electrons in atoms create a field that has this sense of solidity that we can walk on and sit on and not walk through. But actually matter is empty—at least earthly matter is. Modern particle accelerators are built to break down matter into smaller and smaller particles: quarks and maybe smaller things than quarks, all of them just little pieces of energy, packets, housings of light, if you will.

This brings us to Albert Einstein’s equation E=MC^2, energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. Now that was the work of genius when he thought of squaring the velocity of light! And, of course, the celebrated demonstration of this was the explosion of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. So today is a double feast, one of glory and one of ignominy. The anniversary of the detonation of the first atomic bomb over civilization, over human beings and their vaporization, will never be forgotten in human history. Along with the Transfiguration they both speak of light, but very different kinds of light. They both speak of revelations, but two different kinds of revelation: one God’s revelation of his intention to bring us into his own nature, the other a revelation of the horror that can be released by human knowledge and human technology when it is misused.

This is a very serious issue for us to look at. Human technology keeps advancing day by day without any growth in moral or spiritual sensitivity that would guide us to use our powers for the common good—the common good, not the good of one little
group or the victory of one little group or the welfare of one particular group, but the common good—something we hardly ever think of, which is a sign of our moral downturn as a society. Sadly, in the history of the human race since the time of Jesus, the glory revealed in the Transfiguration has not been that attractive to people, not as much anyway as the lust for power represented by the atom bomb, the power to dominate others, control others, have your way with others. That’s been more desirable to more people, sad to say. This, of course, is moral depravity, but we need to say it and think about it.

St. Paul points out in the sixth chapter of Ephesians that our contention, our battles, are not against flesh and blood. It’s not Hezbollah or the Israeli army or the government of Iran or Al Qaeda, or any other group of people that are behind the evils of the world, but “the powers, the principalities, and the dominations”—he calls them. Those are his words, in other words, spiritual forces that use people and tempt them into depravity, the misuse of power, the desire to rule over others. Because we are controlled by our desires, if we desire God, then God rules our life. He is our master. That’s what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. It means he is our master: his life, our life; his ideas, our ideas; his wishes, our wishes. That’s what it means to be a disciple of Christ. But on the other hand, if we desire power over others, then that’s what will dominate our lives—“the powers,” as Paul calls them. If we want to dominate, then the “dominations” will rule over our lives. It will be our choice, mind you.

If we observe our world and our fellow-travelers in this life, we find that for far too many fear is more real and inspiring than love. What is love? A lot of people don’t have a clue! But they know what fear is. They can feel it, and it motivates them and inspires their whole lives. And we wonder why the world is the way it is? Well, that’s one reason. We can see that hatred and the desire for vengeance are much more long-lasting than gratitude. It’s very easy to take all blessings for granted, but we don’t forget how we have been cheated or double-crossed. Even believers remain passive and resigned, as if that’s proper piety, instead of committed to the spiritual warfare that dominated Jesus’ life and the lives of the apostles and saints. They were all involved in spiritual warfare; that means the battle between good and evil, which is not fought with guns or bombs, no matter how sophisticated, but with prayer and fasting and works of mercy.

Recent events in the Middle East should be for everyone a wake-up call. After all, God has given dominion to mankind. Nothing is going to intercede except you with your prayers and your holy desires and your fastings and your works of mercy and your desire for justice.

Thirty years ago some Croatian children claimed that the Blessed Mother appeared to them on the side of a hill near the town of Medjugorje with this message: she said, “Repent before it is too late.” Well, that was about thirty years ago, and it keeps getting later, but repentance does not materialize, and we know that for some people it is too late; it has become too late. All the people who died in Yugoslavia from genocide—it’s too late for them. All the people who died in Rwanda—it’s too late for them; and Sudan—it’s
too late for them, and in the Middle East, and in Iraq—some of our own family members—it’s too late for them. We haven’t repented yet!

We need to be reenergized as people of faith. The glory revealed in Christ is in us too. Once we are baptized that light that the apostles saw in Jesus is given to us as well with a tremendous power for good, too often lying fallow and untapped while we scurry about with our own agenda. One thing is for certain, God’s will can only be done on earth if we desire it above all else—above all else—not as one thing on our list, but above all else the will of God!

The message of Medjugorje is, of course, and has been true, and always will be true. In the Book of Deuteronomy God said, “I lay before you life and death, therefore choose life that you may live by loving the Lord, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him.” This is not just a nice quotation. It’s not something we can put on a holy card. What this means—and it may be shocking to think about—it means that our destiny is our own choice. What shall it be?