

REAL TRANSFORMATION AND FALSE TRANSFORMATION

Friday, August 6th was the feast of the Transfiguration. Jesus, on Mount Tabor with Peter, James and John, is transfigured before them. Transformed. Dazzling. With the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah clearly visible with him before the three stunned apostles. On that same date, August 6th but many years later another event transformed the world as we know it. It inaugurated what became known as the “Atomic Age.” It was the American surprise decision to drop the atom bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima.

Hiroshima had a civilian populace of around 250,000. 66,000 of whom were killed, many instantly. Another 69,000 were severely wounded and maimed. Mostly women. Mostly children. Mostly elderly. These were not combatants. These were families, not soldiers.

To put this into perspective: The Japanese surprise attack on Pearly Harbor killed 2400 Americans. The Osama bin Laden surprise raid of 9/11 killed around 3,000 Americans. 66,000 Japanese died almost instantaneously that day. Why do I go into all this 76-years later on a muggy Sunday morning in Ambler? Good question. Yes, the atom bomb brought an end to the Second World War. But it did something else, something that was not intended but something which has had a devastating effect on our entire world ever since but often without our realizing it. Something more happened than the obliteration of sixty-six thousand human beings as horrendous as that was.

In 1974, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen whose cause for canonization has been introduced and who was then Director of the National Propagation of the Faith, and an early 1950's Television personality gave a sermon in Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. This was 1974 right after I was ordained. He declared “The bombing of Hiroshima to be the origin of the counterculture itself, with its attendant emphasis on freedom from conventional restraints, boundaries and limits. What? The Atom Bomb and the 60's Counter-culture? Connected? But listen to him.

"See how much the world has changed? Now, what made it change? I think maybe we can pinpoint a date: 8:15 in the morning, the sixth of August, 1945. Can any of you recall what happened on that day? ... it was the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima in Japan. When we flew an American plane over this Japanese city and dropped the atomic bomb on it we blotted out boundaries. There was no longer a boundary between the civilian and the military, between the helper and the helped, between the wounded and the nurse and the doctor, between the living and the dead - for even the living who escaped the bomb were already half-dead. So we broke down boundaries and limits. And from that time on the world has said 'We want no one limiting us'. So that, you people have heard the song, you've sung it yourselves: 'I've got to be me, I've got to be free'. We want no restraint, no boundaries, no limits. I have to do what I want to do. Now let's analyze that for a moment. Is that happiness: I've got to be me? I've got to have my own identity?"

We did not know that dropping that bomb would begin the process of obliterating all boundaries in life, all limitations, all sense of our being creatures before a Creator God and

replace it with ourselves being the ones to call all the shots. We now decide what we will do. We decide what is acceptable and what we will not stand for. The only boundaries will be the ones we want to make or impose. We will decide what is moral and doable and what is forbidden. These will be the only limits. The ones we identify. The ones we set.

Does any of this begin to sound familiar? Have you not felt our country, our world falling apart at the seams? Falling down around us? Deteriorating helplessly? Have we not felt the young, not bad people and often very idealistic, rejecting pretty much the whole of our faith beliefs and moral principles? There are no limits on marriage, who can and who cannot be married? Nor any real limits on our sexual expression. Nor on what recreational activities we will engage in. Or with whom. Or how. Or any limit on who I can say I am—whether in the Olympics, or the workplace or the home.

No boundaries. Not in our moral life. Nor our civic life. Nor our private life. Nor our faith life. We will say what is true or not true. Much of this is not new. Elijah the prophet felt a lot of this in his own day about 3,000 years ago in ancient Israel. And yet, despite his wanting to die to get out from under the terribleness of it all God did provide for him. Just the basics at first. Food and water. But then God led him to the mountain. And there Elijah came to know God and that God was with him. Elijah was not alone. And there was a way out.

On Mount Tabor, the three apostles came to know Jesus in a moment of glory. When they saw him hanging from the cross and their whole world was dashed before them and all their dreams and their hopes destroyed they would forget this moment. But Jesus rises from the dead. Now they begin to realize. He established a new rule in the world. His kingdom. And in the kingdom of God there are clear boundaries. Clear limits. Clear right and wrong ways to live and interact with one another. Things we are called to do and are graced by God to do; and given the Spirit to accomplish despite what is happening in the world all around us. Certain things are in; certain things are out for those who believe in Jesus Christ. The focus is on the person of Jesus. God with us. Emmanuel. The Messiah of God.

But how can Jesus do this? He abides with us by becoming bread for our journey and by means of the life-giving waters of baptism. I am the Bread of Life. I am with you. And by the teachings of the Church which guide us and enlighten us on the way. We can embrace the Lord and we can embrace his view on life and its meaning. And we can live that way. But don't expect that this will make you popular or favored. It doesn't work that way. And we have come to know this truth recently ourselves. But we are not alone but we can remain steadfast, without condemning anyone else for what they do or how they live. We have a moral way of living that still maintains—even in the Atomic Age unleashed seventy-six years ago on Hiroshima.

In this time of the pandemic, we need the presence of the Lord and the clarity and authenticity of his teachings even more. The Lord knows all about the obliteration of boundaries and its effect on culture and people. His way is the only truly viable way to live in this world. And it is his way that opens us into that life that does never end.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.