

## Figuration, Configuration, Transfiguration

Second Sunday of Lent – Year C – 17 March 2019

Readings: Gen 15:5-12,17-18; Phil 3:17 – 4:1; Lk 9:28b-36

*“He will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body”* (Phil 3:21)

During Lent, doesn't it seem strange that the Church places before us the glorious figure of a radiant Christ upon the mount of Transfiguration when it actually should be setting before us the disfigured Jesus of Nazareth crucified upon Calvary? It might! But Holy Mother the Church is very careful in choosing readings that make us acquainted with the whole mystery of Christ during Lent, beginning with the seeds of salvation history being sown in Abram's so-called 'covenantal figuration', which Jesus definitively discloses in his Transfiguration to three of his disciples, with Paul finally exhorting his Philippi-brethren to seek configuration to Christ. Thus, figuration, transfiguration and configuration could be three words summing up the three readings of today.

### Scriptural Signposts from the Three Readings:

1. Figuration of Father Abram: Abram—who will later be renamed Abraham—is promised by God to be the fountainhead of a great faith tradition which will later branch out into the Judaic, Christic and Islamic streams of faith traditions. In poetic fashion God promises Abram that his descendants will be innumerable like the stars of the sky. The promise of land was always sealed by the drawing up or 'cutting' of a covenantal pact. Abram asks: “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it [i.e., the land of Canaan?]?” To give him a concrete sign, God advises Abram to lay out the animals of sacrifice split into halves. Splitting sacrificial animals into halves symbolized the two contracting parties of a covenant who were supposed to walk between the split halves. Here, God alone—with the symbol of fire and smoke—passes through the split halves. Ratifying the covenant that day, God says: “To your descendants I give this land ....”. The Israelites will take possession of the land only under the leadership of Joshua.
2. Transfiguration of Jesus: Although there is no mention of place, the transfiguration is traditionally understood to have taken place on Mount Tabor near Nazareth. A few days earlier—Luke mentioning “about eight days” in v.28a—Peter had declared Jesus to be the Christ or the Messiah, and Jesus had foretold his passion and death. Despite Jesus' passion prediction, none of the disciples expected him to be treated so brutally and killed. Hence, as a kind of preparation for fortifying their faith, Jesus gives them a *darshan* of what his glorified body would look like after the resurrection and ascension. The six characters mentioned at the Transfiguration are important. The three disciples—Peter, James, John—will be the same three who will witness the start of Jesus' disfiguration at the Garden of Gethsemane, entering his passion, sweating drops of blood. At Gethsemane too, they will be “heavy with sleep” and clueless as to the magnitude of the moment. The three 'glorious characters'—Moses, Elijah, Jesus – represent the prophetic tradition. They were “speaking *of his departure* which he [Jesus] was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” In Jesus' time, many Jews believed that Moses and Elijah would return at the end-times. For the three disciples, seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah would mean that he too was just *one* of the

end-time figures. However, the “voice from heaven” (of the Father) saying, “*This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him!*” singles out Jesus as God’s unique and final emissary. Three details are worth noting: (a) The change in appearance in Jesus’ face reminds one is reminiscent of Moses on Mount Sinai [Ex 34:29]; (b) The voice from heaven reminds us of Deut 18:15 when Moses tells his people, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren – Him shall you heed;” (c) The Transfiguration will remain indelibly imprinted in the minds and hearts of the disciples who will use this event to give witness to the Crucified-Risen Lord [see 2 Pet 1:16-18].

3. Configuration to Christ: Like the gospel passage, the second reading too highlights ‘change’—of our earthly existence at the end-time. From his prison at Ephesus, Paul urges his community at Philippi to be firm in their faith and faithful in their religious practice. Paul contrasts the terms “wretched bodies” and “glorious bodies” to instill hope in his people whose “commonwealth is in heaven”. These two terms are also used in 1 Cor 15 where Paul explains God’s eternal salvific plan in and through Christ. Negatively, he warns his people about being “enemies of the cross” whose “god is their belly”; and, on a positive note, he promises that: “God will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body.”

### **Three Current Concerns:**

1. The Legal Concern [Moses]: Law is important for the smooth functioning of church and society. Canon Law and Constitutional Law are necessary to protect personal rights and promote communitarian ideals. However, pharisaical application of Law can be oppressive if not animated by the supreme ‘law of love’. Today, on the one hand, with exaggerated individualism, many of us transgress all God’s laws, and, on the other, with heightened majoritarianism, many groups subvert constitutional and civil rights of other communities. In this context, how much am ‘I’ and how much are ‘We’ governed by the law of love?
2. The Prophetic Concern [Elijah]: With his name meaning ‘The Lord is my God’, Elijah is a good model of an ideal prophet. He keenly listened to God’s word, functioned as God’s mouth, walked along God’s chosen paths for him, and worked many miracles as God’s hands. There is not really a shortage of priests in India. But, do we have a sufficient number of prophets—in deep communion with God, closely in touch with God’s people, and courageous enough to announce and denounce in God’s name?
3. The Configuration Concern [Christ]: Scripture and Tradition place Christ at the centre of the cosmos. Humankind, and the whole of creation, waits with eager longing until we find our fulfillment in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:19-25). However, Christic configuration always entails the paschal mystery—death and resurrection, falling and rising, wretched bodies and glorified bodies, disfiguration [Calvary] and transfiguration [Tabor]. Peter is tempted to be rooted atop the mountain: “Master, it’s good for us to be here; let’s make three tents!” But Jesus invites him to descend from Tabor and ascend Calvary—to the cross!

**Reflection:** To a Peter-like disciple who wanted to encamp on firm ground unaffected by the tears and trials of others, the Master said: “What is the solid ground of the bird migrating across continents? What is the firm foundation of the fish carried by the river to the great ocean?” [End]