

Editorial

MOUNTAIN-TOP EXPERIENCES ARE GREAT, BUT....

On Transfiguration Sunday a couple of years ago my wife and I had the good fortune to be on the island of Maui. We attended church in a fine old stone building where the congregation had been established in 1826. The minister, a native Hawaiian, preached a good sermon on the transfiguration text, and during the course of it he didn't once mention "mountain-top experiences". I was grateful.

I take a "mountain-top experience" to be that of people who manage to climb to an impressive height on some mountainous terrain, and survey what is to be seen from that vantage point. They are filled with a mystical wonder at the glory of nature, with all its variety, and for some it will even be a moment to thank God for his handiwork. But people can't stay up there forever. They must come down and get on with their lives. And Simon Peter forgot that fact when he was on the mountain with Jesus, whereas Jesus, forever practical, saw the necessity of going back down and dealing with the pressing problems below.

That's the way many sermons on the transfiguration have been shaped. But I contend that it's not the right shape. A "mountain-top experience" belongs to general human sensibilities. When the transfiguration story, with Peter's dazed utterance, is placed in that mind-set it becomes a standard morality tale: i.e., we mustn't allow unusual experiences to make us lose our responsibilities for real life. The story of the transfiguration, however, is about the identity of Jesus Christ, and in what context his person and work are to be understood.

We might be more open to that line of interpretation if we think of Moses at Mount Sinai. Christian preachers don't usually come at that event as a "mountain-top experience". They generally recognize that what happened at Sinai is part of Israel's narrative of deliverance, and her establishment as God's

covenant people. I believe we should handle the transfiguration story in the same way. Thus in the latter account we note the presence with Jesus of two figures who represent the story of Israel: Moses and Elijah. Even though throughout their narratives the Gospel writers present Jesus as repeatedly quoting scripture, and thus identifying himself as a Jew among Jews, this unique appearance of Moses and Elijah at the moment of his transfiguration clinches it. That's where Jesus belongs: to Israel. Without Israel's narrative we lose Jesus' true identity. And the story in question is not just about Jesus being with Moses and Elijah; it's about him being transfigured. The link with Moses' face shining after being up the mountain with God is an obvious one, and I believe the compilers of the *Revised Common Lectionary* are on the mark when they put that story side by side with the account of the transfiguration. But it's not just Jesus' face that shines: his whole body and clothing are dazzling white. The three disciples, and through them the rest of us, are thus given a sign that has at least two sides to it: (1) the significance of Moses and Elijah in God's design; (2) Jesus' precedence in it. This is confirmed by the voice from heaven, stating that this is truly God's beloved Son, and they must listen to him. Then, as they are coming down, Jesus urges the disciples to keep quiet about what they have seen until after he is raised from the dead. In the course of saying that, however, he doesn't repeat the title given him at his baptism, and the title which has just been repeated on the mountain: "Son of God". Instead Jesus once again uses the self-designation that is found throughout the Synoptics, and even 13 times in John's Gospel, "Son of Man".

There are many questions that an interpreter of this event would want to ask, one of the obvious ones being why it is that in his resurrection appearances Jesus' body and clothes do not shine as they do here, or as do the clothes of the angels at the tomb (Mt.28:3; Lk 24:4). Indeed, several times in those appearances of Jesus his disciples are uncertain of his identity! But whatever we do, we must hold the transfiguration story

tightly to the overall salvation narrative, and resist the temptation to employ it as a general morality tale.

There's nothing wrong with morality tales. We all use them, and inevitably they become material for sermons. But when we preach on the Gospels I believe we should keep in mind that nothing in them — including items like the parable of the Good Samaritan — is a simple morality tale. All the incidents and teaching belong to the salvation story that begins with Abraham and has its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

— A. M. W.