

**March 17, 2019 The Mountaineers Homily:** Some forty years ago a distinguished British subject and native of New Zealand, Edmund Hillary turned up in a commercial as a spokesman for Master Card. I suspect few American viewers recognized him. In 1953, the year of Queen Elizabeth's coronation, Edmund Hillary, a mountaineer, was the first to reach the summit of Mt. Everest, the highest point on earth. At the top of the mountain, Edmund and his team basked in glory, but only for a short time. One of the basic facts of mountain climbing is that more help is needed going down the mountain than going up. And, sure enough, their descent was complicated by drifting snow that had covered their tracks. Edmund Hillary successfully completed his mission and, for his noble efforts, was knighted by the Queen.

Special things seem to happen on mountains. Just consider the various mountains of Christ's life: the mountain of the temptation, the mountain of his great preaching, the mountain of his prayer, the mountain of his Transfiguration, the mountain of his agony, the mountain of the cross and, finally, the mountain of his Resurrection

In today's gospel Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, John and James, up the mountain. Eight days earlier he had challenged them to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him. (Lk.9:23) Luke the Evangelist informs us that they "saw his glory". The transfiguration event was a preview of our Lord's Resurrection. One is reminded of a popular song by the late entertainer, Al Jolson, *"I'm Sitting On Top Of The World"*. But they could not remain there for long. By guiding the apostles down the mountain Christ was instructing them in the faith they would need for the trials ahead. The very three disciples who were a witness to the transfigured Christ were also present at the agony in the garden of Gethsemane.

One of the great Pontiffs of the Church, Pope Leo the Great, was of the view that the Lord was strengthening his disciples for the crucifixion to come and desired to minimize the scandal of his ignominious death. It is interesting to note that once the disciples resume their ministry, they are called upon to heal a boy with a demon. They failed miserably. "I begged your disciples to cast it out but they could not". (Lk.9:40) declared the father of the boy.

After the dramatic event of his Transfiguration, Jesus then begins his descent, his final descent, to Jerusalem. The mystery of his passion and death looms large. The shadow of the cross begins to lengthen.

Surely one of the most important lessons of today's gospel is the primacy of prayer. The Transfiguration of Christ is a prayer event. It displays visibly what happens when Jesus speaks with his Heavenly Father. "When he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzling white". (Lk.9:29) A story: When I was a child, I once heard the sound of whispering in my parent's bedroom. The door was slightly ajar I was faced with the temptation of looking inside. I could not resist the temptation. I somehow managed to stealthily take a peek. What I discovered was a life-changing moment. My father was praying on his knees. His prayer may not have changed him, but it surely changed me. Seeing a devout person praying can be a moment of grace.

In his reflections on the Transfiguration of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI writes, "The Christian life consists in continuously scaling the mountain to meet God and then coming down bearing the love and strength from him, and to serve our brothers and sisters with God's own love".

On whichever mountain we find ourselves it is always a golden opportunity of encountering God. Jesus prays on mountains. Jesus teaches on mountains. Special things happen on mountains. We can echo the words of Peter himself: "Master, it is good that we are here". (Lk.9:33)

Amen!