

Second Sunday in Lent, 25th February 2018

Let us imagine for the moment that we are standing (or sitting perhaps, as you are now) in today's Lenten station church in Rome, Santa Maria in Domnica. You would find, if you were to look around you, that the church is on the whole pretty drab, except for what immediately grabs your attention in front of you: the mosaic in the apse, surrounded by an arch of more mosaic. Unsurprisingly, the central figure is that of Our Lady, given that the church is dedicated to her: 'Santa Maria'. At her feet kneels the ninth-century pope responsible for these stunning mosaics, Pope Paschal I, his head framed with a square halo, thus indicating that he was still alive at the time.



And why are we here? – To celebrate the Second Sunday in Lent with its Gospel of the Transfiguration. We have climbed up the Caelian Hill, one of the famous Seven Hills of Rome; no, not quite the “high mountain” up which our Lord brought Peter, James and John, but a hill none the less. If we were to draw our attention away for a minute from the apse and look at the mosaics on either side of it; we would then notice two standing figures, each one holding a scroll, who (though not immediately recognisable) are Moses and Elijah. And where are we? – The mountain of the Transfiguration!

Bringing ourselves back to the ground again (and perhaps with a bit of a bump), you will notice on the front of your missalettes an image of our Lord flanked by Moses and Elijah; though, unlike the mosaic, their scrolls have writing on them, as one would indeed expect on a scroll. Moses' is the easiest to decipher, since it simply consists of the Roman numerals, I to X: the Ten Commandments, otherwise known as the Decalogue, meaning 'ten words'.



There is an interesting connection here with the forty days of Lent, and with last Sunday's Gospel of the Temptations, which we might have heard read down the road (from Santa Maria in Domnica that is) at that day's station church, St John Lateran, the pope's own cathedral of course. We are told in the book of Exodus that Moses was on top of Mount Sinai "with the Lord forty days and forty nights: he neither ate bread nor drank water, and he wrote upon the tables the ten words of the covenant" (Ex 34:28).

The same association with Mount Sinai and fasting for forty days and forty nights is also present on the scroll of the prophet Elijah, in the Hebrew inscription, or more precisely in the story surrounding it from the first book of the Kings: Elias "arose, and ate, and drank, and walked in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights, unto the mount of God, Horeb [that is, Mount Sinai]. And when he was come thither, he abode in a cave: and behold the word of the Lord came unto him, and he said to him: What dost thou here, Elias? And he answered [with those Hebrew words on the scroll]: With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of hosts" (1 K 19:8-10).

God's question to Elijah, Elias, is probably one that he also asks us: "What dost thou here"? What are we doing here at Santa Maria in Domnica? We are again admiring the ninth-century mosaics, and our eyes now move away from Moses and Elijah back to the central figure. But is this really the Transfiguration? – The Madonna (though, it must be said, with the Child on her lap)? This curiously enough is one of the earliest instances of Our Lady, together with Christ Child, replacing the image of Christ enthroned, or coming on the clouds of heaven, by himself.

But Our Lady, you may object, was not present at the Transfiguration! That may be so, yet she surely, above all other human beings, can help us enter into the mysteries of her Son's life. And we indeed accompany her as we meditate upon this fourth luminous mystery of the Holy Rosary. Whilst meditating upon the story of the Transfiguration in today's Gospel, two things seem to stand out which can in fact be related specifically to the Virgin Mary.

Firstly, when Peter has finished speaking, "a bright cloud overshadowed them. And lo, a voice out of the cloud, saying: 'This is my beloved Son'" (Mt 17:5). What had the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary? – "the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Lk 1:35). In the Transfiguration, the overshadowing of divine power is also accompanied by a divine declaration that Mary's Son is the "Son of God": "my beloved Son". She, who was conscious of Christ's humanity and divinity from the first moment of his conception, can thus help us to make sense of his transfigured glory and the voice of his Father.

Secondly and still bound up the first point, after the disciples had heard the divine voice; "fell on their faces" out of fear; and finally been assured by Jesus himself: "they lifting up their eyes saw no one, but only Jesus" (Mt 17:8). Our Lady had that singleness of vision and had, you could say, eyes only for her Divine Son, the same Son that you see on her lap in the mosaic at Santa Maria in Domnica. She may be the more prominent figure, but it is he who is the focus of her attention; and it is through her we too focus our eyes only on Jesus (cf. Mt 17:8).