

Today's Gospel reading tells of a unique experience in the life of Jesus. So far as we know it never happened to anyone but him, and it happened to him only once. He and three of his followers had gone together to the top of a mountain. While they were there, his face began to shine as the sun; and his garments became radiantly white. Then Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus. And finally the mountain was blanketed with a bright cloud, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Those are the facts of the story. To repeat them is one thing, to explain them is yet another. Why this happened and what it means is not explained, but one thing seems certain - it must have been a great moment for everyone involved.

You and I have never had such an experience, but we all know what it means to have experiences of illumination and insight. We, too, have had those experiences when, even for a moment, vision cleared, doubt and cynicism fled, and faith seemed the most real and reasonable thing in the entire world.

Jesus instructed his three disciples not to tell of this experience until after his death and resurrection. Whether they obeyed that instruction, we do not know; but I am certain there must have been times when they discussed it among themselves.

We all have those days when we need to remember the mountaintop moments of life. And this, it seems to me, is such a time. Pessimism would appear to be the prevailing mood of the hour. There is growing skepticism concerning the ability of society to correct its course and to solve its problems.

Such a time underlines the deep need to remember our better days. And by that I do not mean simply happier times, but mountaintop moments when great things seemed great, and life was filled with hope, and we were at our best.

We all have our good days and our bad days. That is an inevitable part of living. But the crucial question becomes - which do we consider the more valid? On which do we base the meaning of our lives - our mountaintop moments or our days of despair? The plain truth is that both are real - the high and the low, the good and the bad; but we have to identify ourselves with one or the other. The art of great living lies in identifying with our best moments, with our highest hopes, and becoming what those moments and those hopes imply.

Such an approach to life, it seems to me, is both real and valid. I refuse to believe that clouds have more validity than sunlight, that despair is more authentic than hope. In our finest moments, we believe in the finest things. None of us has ever been privileged to talk, face to face, with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But we have had those occasions when life came into focus and the best things seemed real. Why, I ask,

why it is not the very essence of wisdom to believe in those mountaintop moments and base our lives upon them.

We ask too much of life if we expect to avoid days of discouragement. We are going to have them, and we might as well get ready for them. The question is not whether they come but how we deal with them. We need not to be at their mercy. When they come, we can remember, and continue to believe in, and base our lives upon the mountaintop moments. They are just as real and at least as valid as the days of despair.

Finally, let us remind ourselves of one more thing - it is often the bad times that bring out the best things in all of us.

We have spoken of these as difficult days, and they are that. But to call them difficult is not necessarily the whole story. Again and again in history, mountaintop moments have arisen from days of despair.

Our Lord, himself, discovered the truth of that. He, too, had days of discouragement. If ever there was a man who might have been expected to always live on the mountaintop, it was Jesus. But such was not the case.

Immediately after his transfiguration, he descended the mountain, there to find his other followers floundering in frustration and failure. And then it was that Jesus said, “What an unbelieving and perverse lot you are. How long must I remain with you? How long must I endure you?”

Those sound like the words of a discouraged man. He, too, had days when nothing seemed to turn out right. But those days did not defeat him. He never became a cynic; he never gave up on life.

I am sure there must have been times when he reached back and remembered that day on the mountain. Once more he felt the reassuring presence of the prophets; and once more he heard the voice saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

To follow him does not mean the end of bad times, but it means to believe in our mountaintop moments even in days of despair, and to live our lives accordingly.