

One of the most famous mountaintop experiences of our time is that of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. We do not know exactly when and where he had it, but he spoke about it in his prophetic Mountaintop Speech made in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3rd, 1968. As it turned out, that speech was to be his last, because the following day, only hours after he made that speech, he was stopped by an assassin's bullet. That mountaintop Speech ended with these words:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.....”

Can you imagine what would have become of the followers of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement if King had died without making that speech? Maybe he would have gone down in history as another disillusioned dreamer. Maybe his followers would have suffered a loss of faith in the cause for which King lived and died. Maybe they would have given up on the Civil Rights Movement and the Dream. But that speech made all the difference. It prepared them for the trauma that was soon to come. It assured them that King was not simply a victim of circumstance, but that his death was somehow part of God's plan in the long struggle for liberation.

King compared his situation to that of Moses who was appointed by God to lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. After a lifetime of faithful service as leader of God's people in their long journey through the desert, Moses himself would die without reaching the Promised Land. That such a selfless and committed leader who had spent himself in the cause of liberation should fail to reach it himself seems incomprehensible to us, but that appears to be a regular pattern in the mystery of God's design. Now, in order to help Moses and his people bear the shock and the consequent crisis of faith this would generate, God led

Moses up Mount Nebo, and there, on the mountaintop, God granted Moses a preview of the Promised Land and its glory. With that Moses was reassured that God was still being faithful to His promise, and the people were reassured that Moses was indeed the man of God he claimed to be.

Something similar is happening on the Mount of Transfiguration in today's Gospel. James and John had followed Jesus because they wanted special seats at his right hand and his left. Peter wanted to know what he would get, since he had left everything to follow Jesus. These were men who believed that the fact that Jesus was the Messiah was going to translate into visible, tangible dividends in this life both for Jesus and for them his followers. If Jesus had not prepared them beforehand by giving them a glimpse into the heavenly glory that was his and theirs at the end of their journey of faith, they would have been devastated by the shock of Jesus' shameful death as a public criminal. Just as the Mountaintop Speech prepared Martin Luther King and his followers, and the mountaintop experience on mount Nebo prepared Moses and the Israelites, so the Transfiguration prepared Jesus and his nearest followers, who would assume the mantle of leadership after him, for the trauma that was soon to come.

Many of us spend our daily life in the valley of toil and hardship. We feel abandoned by God and begin to doubt our faith and its promises. If we remain close to Jesus during this season of Lent, one mountaintop experience is all we need and our doubts and fears will turn into blessed assurance. All because our eyes have seen the glory of the Lord, our own future glory.

(This homily was cribbed from the archive of the Late Fr. Munachi E Ezeogu cssp. of Nigeria.)

