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And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son," with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.
(Matthew 17:1-8)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

You may be wondering why the Gospel story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is read in this vigil for peace and justice. Certainly, in the calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church the day before the commemoration of "the holy Transfiguration" on 6 August is called the proeortia, service of preparation. But I am inviting you to meditate on this text because of an experience in my own life-time which has radically changed the course of human history.

On 6 August 1945, I was participating, with other students, in a work camp in a poor area in Jamaica. In our devotions we had read this passage. We hardly understood its meaning, and in our youthful questioning minds it seemed a very strange, improbable story. When we had stopped working, we came back to our camp, and listened to the evening news on the radio. We could hardly believe what we heard. On that very day, a bomb carrying a nuclear warhead had been dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. It came as a blinding flash of light

which created a huge cloud. But what resulted was wholesale destruction, the full extent of which we only read about much later.

Suddenly, a connection came in my mind between the destructive shining light and clouds in Hiroshima, and the story of Jesus with his three disciples on the mountain. The Gospel says that "his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light", and that "a bright cloud overshadowed" all who were on the mountain. What a strange fact that the President of the U.S. and his advisers had made the political and military decision to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and later on Nagasaki on the very day when Christians around the world were celebrating this event of the transfiguration of Christ. Did he and his colleagues realise this coincidence? Evidently not. But ever since I have been haunted by it, and my own ministry has been affected by it. This Transfiguration story has acquired, over the years, a new meaning for me and a challenge to my existence. What in fact have I learned which I can share with you this evening?

First, our life and ministry is in a constant crisis of testing, and we need to discover ever afresh who we are and what is our calling. This means making a conscious effort to be in communion with God in the community of believers. In our story, at the critical point of his life and ministry, Jesus found it necessary to take some distance from the onrush of events. He took three of his disciples to a high mountain to be quiet, to reflect, to put what had happened and what was to come in the perspective of who he was and what he was called to be and do. He needed to be intensively in communion with God as he prepared for the next steps towards the final encounter with the forces of darkness which were ranged against God and his purpose for humanity and creation.

Why did he need this? At the beginning of his ministry Jesus had joined the renewal movement of John the Baptist, and had offered himself to be baptized. John perceived who he was and was diffident to baptize him. But Jesus replied: "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." And when he was baptized the Spirit descended like a dove and alighted on him and a voice from heaven said: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:13-17). He then went out to the wilderness led by the Spirit for forty days and forty nights to be tested before embarking on his ministry of offering life in word and deed through his message of the Kingdom

of God and his righteousness, justice. This ministry had evoked the blind enthusiasm of the crowds and the equally blind opposition of the authorities.

Now, he has come to a turning point in this ministry. At Caesarea Philippi he has challenged his disciples as to who people say he is and what they think he is. Peter speaks for them when he confesses: "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God." They were aware of who he was, but did not and could not know in what manner. So he told them that what he was demanded that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the religious authorities and be killed and the third day be raised (Matth. 16:13-21). Peter had rebuked him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Jesus replied sternly: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are not on the side of God but of the people" (Matth. 16:22-23). It is in this context that Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the high mountain apart.

Paul had written to the confused and divided, though well-meaning Philippians that though Christ was "in the form (morphe) of God, he did not want equality with God a thing to be grasped at, harped upon, but emptied himself, taking the form (morphe) of a slave, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8). Here on the high mountain, we are told that Jesus was transformed, transfigured (from the Greek verb metamorphein). His inner being was given a profound clarity, illumined and focused -- and that in the presence of his companions. A voice once more confirmed who he was: "This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

We who are gathered at this Assembly as the company of believers in Christ, have been confessing our faith in Christ, the Son of the living God, as the life of the world. We confess that he took on our human form (morphe), that is, what we are in and for ourselves as made in God's image. We come making this confession also as members of the human race in all its agony and despair, in its deformed and distorted character. We represent all that went into the decision regarding the bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and also its effects in death and destruction. Our worship here, our testimonies have enabled us to glimpse again the transformed, transfigured being of Christ the bringer of peace and righteousness, justice. He, the transfigured one, is our peace and justice and only in him and through him can we take an unequivocal stand for peace and

justice, as peacemakers and as those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, justice, and keep on seeking it.

But what is this peace and justice, this life in all its fullness? The story of the transfiguration tells us that Jesus was in communion with God and with Moses and Elijah. Those two represented what God had offered to humankind and the decisions they had to make and the fearless witness they made. Moses was the means of the people of Israel being transformed from the "house of bondage" in Egypt to the "house of Israel" through the Exodus. On the mountain, he had intensive communion with God, speaking with him mouth to mouth (Numbers 12:8) and knowing him face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10). It is in this relationship that he received the teaching, law (Torah) and heard God's challenge, as reflected in the Book of Deuteronomy:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. ... I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendents may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you ... (Deuteronomy 30:15-20a)

"Choose life!" Choose what is good, that is, what expresses our inner being as made in God's image to be shared with others. Choose the blessing, that is, what communicates our vitality to others, what enables us to put what we are and have at the disposal of others that they might become their true selves and share their lives also with others. That is God's purpose revealed in creation and in men and women made in his image to participate in his life and communicate that life to one another according to his commandments and promises of good. That is life in action. That is true security, peace and justice.

At a crisis in Israel's history, Elijah the prophet appeared on Mount Carmel and challenged the people of Israel to a choice: "How long will you go on limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The contest was between the Lord, Yahweh, he who was present to liberate his people at the Exodus and transfigure them into his covenant people for the sake of his purpose for the world, and Baal, the representative of divisive, oppressing and in fact impotent forces of nature and history which wreak havoc on people and creation. It was Elijah who pointed the way to true justice, right relations with God and with others and creation, and true peace, that well-being which comes out of total consecration to God and his revealed

will for humanity (1 Kings 18). It was in the mountain, too, that Elijah heard the voice of gentle stillness which set the course which had to be taken by others in the name of Yahweh (1 Kings 19:9-21). The teaching of the prophets who followed Elijah was summed up by Micah: "He has shown you, O human being, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). Justice, loyal love and communion with God are one reality.

Jesus, we are told by Mark, who was close to Peter, was having an intensive chat with Moses and Elijah, and the voice said to the disciples: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased: keep on listening to him." We have been repeating the words of the message of the First Assembly: "We have to make of our Church in every place a voice for those who have no voice and a home where everyone will be at home." But we cannot be a voice unless we listen constantly and with all our being to the voice of Christ, just as he constantly listens to the voice of God through Moses and Elijah. And that means listening to each other as God speaks to and through us in the midst of the amorphous voices in our world today.

What Jesus has to say to us is not comfortable. Peter, James and John are representative of us. They share the form (morphe) of our human condition. Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, who would fulfil history as God promised, and therefore as the Son of the living God. But he could not face the consequences. He could not accompany Jesus to the cross. Confessing is not only in word and doctrine, but in deed and in self-offering. A few days before at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had said to the disciples:

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?" (Matth. 16:24-26).

But Peter had not yet heard.

On the mountain, his immediate reaction to the divine presence was: "Lord, it is a good thing that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Peter was not able to perceive that this glimpse of the true nature of Christ should have given him a new perspective to his calling. The transfiguration was not an end in itself but

rather a disclosure of our proper destiny. That means that we do not remain in this tent, in a spiritual euphoria, nor do we accept things as they are in the world, nor run away from the life and death struggle with the forces of evil into some safe, devotional ghetto. Transfiguration means that our consciousness and our conscience are awakened to take all those forces of evil in our hearts and in the world into the heart of God in suffering love which judges and liberates. Immediately, after the event of the Transfiguration, Jesus and his disciples went down from the mountain to the crowd. A man pleads for his epileptic son who is deformed and unable to cope with himself. The disciples are hopeless in facing this situation. They lack faith, that transformation of our wills which are turned to God in adoration and service, and the impossible becomes possible (Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-24). At this Assembly, we are once more called, by the transfiguring grace of God, to attempt the impossible for peace and justice.

This story of the Transfiguration also discloses our human deformation in the persons of James and John. In spite of this shattering experience in the presence of Christ and the call to listen to him and therefore follow his way of justice and peace, those two brothers ask, through their mother, that they should have the places of honour in Christ's kingdom. Transfiguration meant for them having power and prestige, and exercising authority over people like the rulers of this world. James and John represent all that finally ends in deciding to drop the bomb on Hiroshima and in the present threats to peace and survival, the structures of injustice and the web of oppression which disfigures the image of God in human beings and also creation. Jesus transforms the whole conception of power by reminding James and John, and us:

"It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28).

Dear sisters and brothers, our vigil tonight is a preparation for us to allow ourselves to be transfigured into the true image of God in Christ that we may be his messengers of liberation, justice and peace in the world. This transfiguration, this metamorphosis, depends on the mercies of God and on the life-giving Spirit. It requires the commitment of our whole beings as a living sacrifice which is well-pleasing to God. It demands that we be not conformed (not follow the schemes) of this time in which we live, but that we be constantly

transformed, transfigured (metamorphein) by the renewal of our consciousness and conscience that we may demonstrate in action the will of God which is good, acceptable and all including. And this we do by employing the gifts of the Spirit in the communion of the body of Christ for the good of all (Romans 12:1-8). Only thus can our true being and that of those who share God's image be unveiled. Let us therefore pray that the Spirit of the Lord will liberate us to behold the glory of the Lord and be continually transfigured into his likeness from glory to glory (in Latin claritas) (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). The vision of the transfigured Christ is our transfiguration that we may with clarity and courage listen to him and be obedient to his call to the blessedness of hungering and thirsting for justice and of being peacemakers.