

Week 2: Taking and Leaving

Gospels:

Mark 9:2-15 Transfiguration

Matthew 4:1-11 Temptation Sunday

A pilgrim journey brings into sharp relief much that we gloss over or take for granted, bringing to attention those things we truly value. Because of our decision to be on the move, we are somehow obliged to make choices about what is essential and what is peripheral. In many ways, this is a continuation from last week with a focus on Your Gospel choice. How do we choose what to keep, what we require for inner vitality and balance, and what do we leave behind? Perhaps some things which may once have helped us, we now find burdensome and obstructive.

Life is a process of continual change and movement in which we look for patterns and significance. The transfiguration links Jesus to the Old Testament figures of Moses (representing Jewish law) and Elijah (representing Jewish prophecy). Mark ties this story to the beginning of Jesus ministry, and similarly Temptation Sunday is the precursor to Jesus ministry.

A Coptic teaching method is iconography. Many icons of the Transfiguration are Trinitarian, where we see a triple divine revelation of the Father, and the presence of Moses and Elijah confirm that Jesus is not just a simple person, a miracle worker and wise teacher, but he is the Son and the Word of the Living God.

From this story, we see Jesus “take” strength from God for his courageous journey to the Cross, and at the same time, the disciples are being challenged to “take” strength in preparation for the tests they will face when Jesus is taken from them.

This week on our pilgrimage we have the opportunity to sift experience and to “take” again those things we require for inner vitality and balance. It is also becoming clearer that we have to “leave” other things, which may once have helped us but which now may be destructive on our journey — be they tasks, habits, ideas, beliefs or even relationships. Taking and leaving cannot be made lightly. If we are to be prophetic in a greedy world, which uses up and discards too quickly, our choices should reflect the generosity of God in the way we share with the poor and the marginalised.

The Transfiguration



Apse mosaic of The Transfiguration of Christ AD 548 - 565
Monastery of St Catherine, Mount Sinai
Kurt Weitzman, January 1964 National Geographic Magazine

The main structure within the Monastery of St Catherine, Mount Sinai is the Church of the Transfiguration, which is the work of the Byzantine architect Stephanos. The main Church of the Transfiguration was built in the 560s, around the time of the Emperor Justinian's death. Behind the apse is the holiest part of the Monastery, the Chapel of the Burning Bush, which incorporates the 4th-century chapel built by the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, and dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Monastery was originally referred to as the Cathedral of the Transfiguration. It was not until several centuries later that the Monastery came to be associated with St. Catherine of Alexandria. Above and around the scene of the Transfiguration, medallions of the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist are on either side of the Lamb of God (the Deesis). You will also note the other medallions of holy men and women.

The image of the Transfiguration has an iconic quality as one might expect. The aim was to draw the viewer closer and uplift him by contemplation of the holy image. The figures lack material form deliberately. They face front. The viewer is brought into contact with the divine.

Of apse mosaics and paintings at this time, the art historian Beat Brenk of La Sapienza in Rome and also of Universitat Basel has written:

“The purpose of the apse paintings was entirely different from that of the nave mosaics, of whose existence most congregants were probably unaware. The nave mosaics were usually devoted to the earthly life of Christ and the saints. The fact that the apse was located behind the altar would almost automatically mean that its theme was associated with the act of worship. But appearances are deceptive.

“Apsal pictures are not liturgical pictures even when they depict Christ as a particularly large and isolated figure, as is the case in S. Cosma e Damiano in Rome. Apsal images were never worshipped, but they attracted notice, and in some cases they teach the believer how to approach the divine. Cult objects must somehow be accessible to and palpable for congregants, but apsal pictures never were. Their function was to direct the congregation’s gaze to the hereafter.

“The spherical curve of the apse was itself an image of the cosmos. Virtually all apsal pictures portray Christ, Mary or the saints with stars, clouds and rainbows on a blue or gold background. Apsal pictures were part of the presbytery, which was clearly separated from the congregation’s area in the nave or side aisles. Apsal images never tell a story, but instead provide congregants with a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. Congregants would have found convincing the proposition that, once in heaven, the saints would intercede with Christ and Mary on their behalf. Apsal mosaics and their depictions of a Christian ‘Olympus’ were one of the most impressive innovations of Christian art.”

From Beat Brenk in *Art and Propaganda fide in Christian art and architecture, in 300–600 in Constantine to c. 600: The Cambridge History of Christianity*; volume 2 edited by Augustine Casiday and FrederickW. Norris (2008)

Discussion Starters:

1. As we cannot carry everything with us on our pilgrimage to the heart, how do we choose what to take and what to leave?
2. On this Lenten pilgrimage what are we finding in our daily lives that is providing balance in our lives in order to nourish our hearts?
3. What am I noticing that may once had helped me but now I am prepared to let go?

Extract from
In Blackwater Woods
by *Mary Oliver*

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal:
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go.
to let it go.



'Light and forest at Isblandskärret, Djurgården'
by *Tommie Hansen (CC BY 2.0)*

A Reflection for Pilgrims

Take some time to gather wisdom for the continuing journey:

What captured my attention

What surprised me

What moved me

What changed me

What is my hope for me and for my faith community

What will I take home