

First of all, Thank you to everyone who has responded to the Bishop's Annual Appeal for Catholic Ministries. If you have not, as of yet, completed a pledge envelope, we are still in need of your assistance. For your convenience, pledge envelopes have been placed in the pews and I ask that you complete an envelope and place it in the collection basket during the offertory.

There was a joke many years ago when Saddam Hussein was captured by American forces, turned over to the newly formed Iraqi, and was tried and hanged. When he arrived in heaven he was met by St. Peter. Sensing Saddam's shock and worry, St Peter reassured Saddam: "Don't worry my son, your 72 virgins are awaiting you right through that golden door." Relieved and overjoyed, Saddam entered through the golden door; only to find 72 nuns dressed in their habits, holding shotguns.

I tell that joke, not to offend or poke fun at Muslims, but to illustrate a point: Despite what we think about the likes of Saddam, ISIS and other radical-Islamo-fascists, it is beyond dispute that they have a particular, inspiring vision of heaven and are willing to die for it. Can we as modern Christians say the same? The most profound words in our readings this Sunday come from St. Paul, namely, "Our citizenship is in heaven." Did anyone leap from their pew when they heard these words? Did hope and inspiration fill your hearts?

Those words don't mean so much to us today. And how could they? Especially when less than half of us "citizens" actually vote, and most especially when our vision of heaven has taken on all the excitement and allure, color and taste of cardboard. Citizenship no longer inspires us and heaven just plain bores us. I can't say much about the former, but I will share some thoughts on the latter. Actually these thoughts come from theologian Peter Kreeft, but they speak to the issue very well.

Kreeft says, the Medieval imagery of heaven (which is almost totally biblical imagery) of light, jewels, stars, candles, trumpets, and angels no longer fits our ranch-style, supermarket world. Pathetic modern substitutes of fluffy clouds, sexless cherubs, harps and metal halos (not halos of light) presided over by a stuffy divine Chairman of the Bored are a joke, not a glory. Even more modern, more up-to-date substitutes—Heaven as a comfortable feeling of peace and kindness, sweetness and light, and God as a vague grandfatherly benevolence, a senile philanthropist—are even more insipid.

He continues: Our pictures of Heaven simply do not move us; they are not moving pictures. It is this aesthetic failure rather than intellectual or moral failures in our pictures of Heaven and of God that threatens faith most potently today. Our pictures of Heaven are dull, platitudinous and syrupy; therefore, so is our faith, our hope, and our love of Heaven.

When we contrast the Gospel we hear this morning with our modern pandemic infection of heavenly dullness, we find that heaven and things godly are about as far from boring as you can get. Peter, James and John are all given a glimpse of Jesus in His heavenly glory, so much so they become “fully awake”, in other words fully alive. This momentary vision and experience of heaven is so profound that Peter suggests that they all stay there with no idea of leaving. Why? Because they had discovered the reality of St. Paul’s statement that our citizenship truly is in heaven, and that heaven is truly that for which we are made. Every longing, desire, and wish we’ve ever had are transformed, met, and even exceeded there. The transfiguration is simply God’s way of tipping his hand, of showing us what lies in store for us if we will simply listen to and follow his Son.

As humans, we need a vision of heaven, one that will inspire and encourage us to live for it. It's sad when you consider that 72 virgins very well may be the best image going. Surely we can do better. Our Catholic tradition has been full of images that inspired and awed millions, but they no longer speak to us today. There is a great need for those that do.

The Transfiguration is one such attempt. It seeks to bridge the gap between faith and sight, hope and assurance. It is a vision of the glory to come and a reminder of the big, blazing, terrible truth about us; that we all have a heaven-sized hole in our hearts and nothing else can fill it. The Transfiguration was about filling that hole a little bit, it was about touching directly Peter, James, and John in a unique personal way, that said “yes, I am real and you are doing the right thing, this man you are following is my Son, and what you see and experience here is nothing compared to what He will lead you to and give to you, if you but trust and follow Him.”

Even though we don't normally spend our spiritual & prayer time contemplating our status as heavenly citizens, we still should take joy in and be extremely grateful for those times when God does send us a reminder of where we truly belong and are called. From time to time we need His vision, and God does give it to us, especially during those times when the light of life darkens and the prospect of heaven loses its luster. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and gives us what we need when we need it. Like the Transfiguration, it may not be what we wanted or could have ever imagined, but if we dare to let God be God, then whatever glimpse He does give us will be more than enough to inspire and sustain us in our journey home.