In the Gospels, the Transfiguration takes place at a critical moment for Jesus and for his mission. Just prior to it, he spoke for the first time of his coming rejection, suffering and death and, beyond them, of his resurrection. It was a message, the first part of which, the disciples did not want to hear, nor did they want to hear what he then added. “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

In the face of the confusion, fear, and anxiety that these statements have provoked among the disciples, Jesus withdraw from the larger group, taking with him Peter, James and John. They ascend a mountain, a favoured place in the biblical tradition for an encounter with God.

“While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed,” we are told, “and his clothes became dazzlingly white.” The appearance with him of Moses and Elijah suggest that what they represent, namely the Law and the Prophets bear witness to Jesus. The experience is meant to reinforce the faith and the commitment of the disciples in the face of the suffering and death of which Jesus has spoken.

The disciples are dazzled and overwhelmed by what they see. Peter, sensing the special nature of what is happening, sensing too and that he is being invited to share in it, wants to hang on to the moment, to not let it pass. Hardly realizing what he is saying, he suggests setting up three tents or dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Before Peter can say anything further, a cloud envelopes him and the others and from its midst a voice is heard. “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him.” The message echoes what was heard at Jesus’ baptism. New here is the command, “listen to him.” Listen to what he is saying to you about the path on which he is to walk and on which he is inviting you to walk with him.

The fact that Jesus’s face is transfigured and his clothes are made dazzlingly white brings a sense of glory and triumph into the scene. They are a promise of the resurrection

It is this element of triumph, of moving beyond pain and suffering, that Peter senses and wants to keep alive in his heart and in the heart of the others. Jesus, however, knows that what Peter wants is impossible. We cannot as it were step out of life. It continues with all that is positive and negative about it. What the experience on the mountain has given to the disciples and by extension to us is the conviction that the last word about Jesus and about us is not death but life. The glory that surrounds Moses and Elijah and, in a different way, Jesus is a promise that it will one day be shared in by disciples of every generation.

Although the Transfiguration is primarily about Jesus and his mission and destiny, it is also about the disciples and the challenges and promises that lie before them.

Our experience is different in many ways from that of the original disciples, and yet there is something in what they experienced that awakens an echo in our minds and hearts. This is true for us as individuals; it is also true for communities and nations and, in a sense, for humanity as a whole.

The Transfiguration was meant to be for those who experienced it and for those, like ourselves, who hear about it a source of hope and of trust. It affirms that in spite of our fear and hesitation, there is every reason for us to hope for a better future, now in this life and beyond it in God.

Like you I have been saddened and moved by the reports and images coming to us out of Ukraine. The courage and commitment that the people have shown in the face of overwhelming odds is a model of dedication and courage.

The violence, hatred, and killing not only of soldiers but also of civilians, including children, represent something that most of us have been spared in our life time. It is deeply moving to see the remarkable example the Ukrainian people are giving us; it is also encouraging to hear about the help they have received and continue to receive from so many countries, including our own. To such help we can add our own contribution including our prayers for those who have died or been wounded and for their families. We pray also for the millions of refugees who have fled the war especially the children. May God be with the Ukrainian people as they struggle in such difficult circumstances to defend their freedom and their independence. May he continue to be for them a source of courage and of hope.