

Sermon: The Feast of the Transfiguration

February 2020

*“...mercifully deliver us from the darkness of this world,  
and change us into his likeness from glory to glory;.”*(Collect, BAS)

I.

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration – the word can be defined as a metamorphosis, or a change in appearance. In the traditional Anglican Church, this was celebrated in August, but – in the modern Calendar – we are blessed to share this vision of Christ **before** we enter the Lenten season.

So, what happened just now in the Gospel? What changed?

According to the Gospel, Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus up a mountain. And while they were praying, Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”.

What an experience for those disciples!

It is interesting that Jesus goes **up** a mountain to pray. Mountains are distant, barren, and difficult to reach. Where we live day-to-day is down in the valleys. We **live** in the “cities of the plain.” While God is certainly all around us, Jesus goes **away** from our civilization to pray. And he takes Peter, James and John, who are among the earliest of his disciples.

Of course, having prayed, He returns to the world, restored and strengthened, for the final stage – His entry into Jerusalem, and the crucifixion, death, and resurrection that follow. Perhaps that is why the Transfiguration comes at this time in the modern Calendar?

Remember that Jesus had previously fasted in the wilderness – and the night he was betrayed, he went into a garden to pray – incidentally, with the same three of his disciples!

## II.

The Transfiguration has been called one of a sequence of Scriptural events in which Heaven meets Earth.

At the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit enters the mortal womb of the Virgin Mary. At His baptism, the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit again descends. And later on, at His crucifixion, the veil of the Temple – the separation of the worldly from the divine – is “rent from top to bottom”. And finally, Christ is resurrected and ascends to Heaven. This fulfils the promise, that puts Heaven within all our reach.

But the experience on the mountain is more than the light on Christ’s face and clothing. The disciples also witness Moses and Elijah, talking with Christ. The symbolism would be obvious to Jews at that time. The appearance of a long-dead patriarch and a long-dead prophet is, again, Heaven meeting Earth. Both are affirmations of the context in which we must see Christ. Moses represents the Law, and the traditions of the Old Covenant, from which Jesus (of the House of David) descends. Elijah represents the prophecies that surround the coming of the Messiah and the New Covenant.

In our Old Testament lesson today from Exodus, we heard how Moses went up his own mountain, in order to receive the ancient Law of the Hebrews. After six days, God appeared to Moses – “the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain!”

And, at the Transfiguration, God also appears on the top of the mountain – in a bright cloud – and says, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” God is telling us – “He is the Messiah!”

## III.

But Jesus was as active before all this as he was afterwards. By the time of the Transfiguration, Jesus had **already** healed the sick. He had **already** fed the thousands with loaves and fishes. He had **already** given us the Beatitudes, in the Sermon on the Mount.

And His divinity had **already** been publically recognized, first by Simeon, and then by John the Baptist.

So the change in his face is not necessarily a change in Christ, so much as a change in how Christ is **seen**.

It is a change in **appearance**, not in **substance**. This is the point where the disciples **know** that he **is** the promised Messiah.

This is a turning point – onto Christ’s road to Jerusalem. The healings and teachings that could be ignored in rural Galilee are going to become a challenge to the *status quo* in Jerusalem, and the result will be his death - and his resurrection.

Mountains, deserts and wilderness areas can be key places in the Bible. Moses received the Law from God on a mountain. Jacob saw angels moving between heaven and earth in a desert. Christ prayed in a tangled garden. He was later crucified on a barren hilltop, outside the city.

In today’s Epistle, Saint Peter writes that, “...we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Jesus “received from God the Father, honour and glory” – and Peter was there on the mountain to see it!

Peter also says in our Gospel, “it is good for us to be here.” **It is indeed!**

In the chapter before today’s Gospel reading, Christ charged His followers; “let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me”. Was the hard slog to the top of the mountain an example of this self-denial? (Did some of the other disciples decide not to go?) Those who made it to the summit literally saw Christ in a new light.

And what a light it was!

For the second time since Jesus' baptism, God speaks from on high, publicly acknowledging His son. So the Transfiguration does not change Jesus – but it pulls back the veil, so we can see the light that is, “the light of the world”.

#### IV.

Many years ago, I went on a trip to Wales with my husband Peter.

We went to Snowdonia, and camped at the foot of Cadair Idris. However, when he then suggested that we should climb it, I was not immediately sold, and wondered what I had gotten myself into! I am perhaps many things, but not a climber – and he was. But, off we went, on what seemed like an unending walk – straight up.

And when I got to the top, I realized what he had been telling me about (having been there before) – the view was spectacular, and nothing like it could be seen from below.

I am not sure if I felt closer to God at that point! But I realized that my sore feet and exhaustion were rewarded by an experience that I would not have had if I had followed the “desires of my own heart” and stayed in the valleys.

Many years later, on my pilgrimage to the Scottish island of Iona, I visited Saint Columba's “Hill of the Angels”, known also as the *Sithean*. It is near the end of the road, leading from the west side of Iona, from the beach where Columba is believed to have landed after his voyage from Ireland. It is said that here, some of his monks witnessed Columba in prayer, surrounded by angels.

Of all the places in Iona, this place felt most like Rev. George MacLeod's description of Iona, as “a thin place, between earth and heaven.” A place where one might be joined in prayer by the angels.

It is interesting how such places – remote islands, mountain tops and wilderness – can be where we **most** feel God's presence. When we encounter God in these “thin places,” he calls us to go back to our communities with the good news of what we have seen.

In the Gospel, Jesus says, “Tell no-one about this vision, until the Son of man has been raised from the dead.” Well, we know that **He is risen indeed**, and we are all now allowed to talk about it!

V.

*So what should we do?*

The Transfiguration shows us the importance of being close to the Divine, so we can see it clearly. God may find us, but we must also seek Him out, and go where He is. The path up the mountain is not easy.

In last week’s Sermon, I quoted C.S. Lewis’ demon Screwtape, reminding the junior demon, Wormwood, that “...the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot...” It is always easier to go **down** the mountain than **up** it. But we are called to follow Christ on the narrow and difficult road, upwards to the summit.

Today’s Gospel tells us what we must do to see the transfigured Christ – the real Christ, in all his glory. Of course, he was there all along – but at the bottom of the mountain, we could not see Him. It is our perception of Christ that is changed.

*How did that happen?*

The Transfiguration is a point in our Scriptural journey where Heaven and Earth touch one another. It is symbolic that this happens on a mountain top – the closest we can get to the Heavens, while remaining on earth. These points exist to remind us along our uphill journey of what waits for us – above, in his Kingdom.

For me, today’s readings speak about a transformation **within us**, brought about by the presence of God. When God works within us, we are changed, whether the people around us notice it or not. Christ’s transfiguration affected the faith of his disciples. God working in our hearts and minds should make us shine more brightly, and reflect His light upon the world.

*What do we need to do?*

Our Psalm tells us that "I myself have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion." But to be true disciples of Christ, we must try to climb that holy hill. If we can get to the summit, like Peter, James and John, then we will see God in a new light – and we will be transfigured by that light!

The question for us is – *how will we let Christ transfigure our lives?*

He is indeed, “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in our hearts.” Let us climb that mountain together, and let that star rise in all our hearts.

Amen.