



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

## Sunday Before Lent 2020

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Of all the passages in the Bible that relate to beauty as a window onto the divine, perhaps the most the most important, is the story we know as the Transfiguration.

The late Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>i</sup>, probably the greatest Catholic systematic theologian of the twentieth century believed that the word “glory” in the Bible is synonymous with the beauty of God.

Of the three transcendental attributes of God<sup>ii</sup>—truth, goodness, and beauty – von Balthasar held that beauty is the least obscured by our fallen nature, and thus provides us with the clearest path to the Beatific Vision – if you have time he explains this over no fewer than fifteen volumes entitled *The Glory of the Lord!*

According to von Balthasar, the essential starting point for the human encounter with God is a moment of aesthetic perception, a glimpse of radiance, mystery, and meaning seen perhaps in a work of art or in the natural world; in the touch or look or action of another human being.<sup>iii</sup>

So, for von Balthasar, the story of the Transfiguration, like a parable, is full of paradox and implicit challenges to us: *“the first instalment of the eschatological transfiguration of the world as a whole.”*<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain to pray and there his appearance is altered and his garments shine with a blinding light. At his side appear Moses and Elijah.

The Transfiguration hearkens back to Moses’ own encounter with God in the form of the burning bush, but it also looks forward to the mysterious post-Resurrection body of Jesus – which is why we read the story of the Transfiguration on the Sunday before we begin our 40-day trek towards Holy Week and Easter.

As with Moses, so with Jesus, the encounter with divine glory is experienced in terms of a transformation – a transformation that does not consume or destroy what is being transformed; the ordinary becomes extraordinary without being fundamentally changed or consumed

Thomas Aquinas<sup>v</sup>, writing seven hundred years before von Balthasar, defined beauty as the splendour of form, the flash of radiance that is at once intensely pleasurable and filled with meaning.

In the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, rising out of plain of Jezreel, the burning light that once appeared to Moses in the

bush now pulses from Jesus himself, revealing him as the God-man Christ, the true icon of the Father – the loving and life-giving embrace of truth, goodness and beauty.

But in this moment of divine revelation, the moment in which all that has been, all that is and all that is to come coalesce, there is also the ‘stuff’ of the broken, damaged, fallen world: the ‘stuff’ of comedy and pathos.

Heavy with sleep, their senses dulled, the disciples are not prepared for this sudden breaking of eternity into their now.

Peter, the patron saint of all those who make the right mistakes, tries to capture and hold on to this manifestation of divine presence, not knowing that no living being could contain or constrain such mystery. In an aside, St Luke tells us, when he records the Transfiguration, that Peter just spoke gibberish, “not knowing what he was talking about.”<sup>vi</sup>

Peter still sees only what St Paul would describe as “seeing through a glass darkly”<sup>vii</sup>. He has glimpsed ‘something’, but can’t make any sense of it. I think St Luke treats St Peter rather harshly, after all, St Peter spoke gibberish because there are no words, no humanly comprehensible concepts available to voice what he and his companions have experienced.

Peter, James and John are covered in a cloud of confusion and bewilderment. And any explanation of what they have

encountered is left to divine voice which interprets the revelation for them.

In the earliest commentaries on the Transfiguration, the Church Fathers point out that it is the *disciples* who are changed on the mountain top, not Christ, because, as their perception grew sharper, they were suddenly able to behold Christ as he truly is.

After the light had dimmed and the cloud had dispersed, the disciples found Jesus alone, the four come down the mountain and return to the ‘stuff’ of the broken, damaged, fallen world; the world in which “the incarnation of truth, beauty and goodness will be betrayed into human hands, who will kill him”.<sup>viii</sup>

But the disciples don’t return to the world as they left it, they return to the world with an image indelibly imprinted on their hearts that could never be erased. It was perhaps in the Transfiguration that they began to perceive that cross and resurrection are a single event: God’s eternal glory and self-emptying one and the same all-encompassing Love.

God is revealed on the mountain top in unfathomable glory, but that glory is only fully glimpsed on the cross of Calvary and in the empty tomb, in the Jerusalem to which we, with Peter and James and John, now journey.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1905 – 1988

<sup>ii</sup> qv Natural Theology, Boedder, SJ, B, Longmans, 1902, Cap. VII, Thesis XXXII

<sup>iii</sup> cf. Gregory Wolfe in <https://imagejournal.org/article/transfiguration/>

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in <https://glenargan.com/2017/03/11/transfiguration-gods-glory-revealed-in-self-giving-love/>

<sup>v</sup> 1225 – 1274

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 9:28–36

<sup>vii</sup> 1 Corinthians 13.12

<sup>viii</sup> cf Matthew 17.22