

THE SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE LENT  
(2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2; Luke 9.28-36)

Eight days later Jesus took with him Peter, John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

We are at a critical moment in the Gospel story. Jesus and his disciples were in the far north of Galilee when he took Peter, John, and James – the inner circle of his companions – up a mountain to pray. Everything in Jesus' life was about to change. In a few days time he would set his face towards Jerusalem, where the tragedy of his rejection and crucifixion would unfold. But, for now, up the mountain, away from the crowds, in the presence of his closest friends, something extraordinary happened. While he was praying, 'the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white'. What can we make of this disturbing story?

One clue is to be found, not in the passage we read, but in the verses that immediately preceded it. Directly after his first prediction of his rejection and death, and his awesome warning to his friends that they would suffer too, Jesus added this promise,

Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not see death before they see the kingdom of God (Luke 9.27).

Eight days after he spoke those words, Jesus took Peter, John and James up the mountain, and there, while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Although they did not then understand what was happening, Peter, James and John were privileged to glimpse Jesus as he now is in his Father's Kingdom. Human he remains, but the glory of God shines through him. The Transfiguration of Jesus gives us a glimpse into the life of the age to come.

Strange as this story is, it is not without precedent within the pages of the Bible. Moses, at the burning bush, was arrested by the sight of what appeared to be a flame of fire coming from a bush: 'the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed' (Exodus 3.2). The glory of God shone there. Following their exodus from Egypt, according to the Bible story, the Israelites were accompanied by a pillar of cloud, by day, and a pillar of fire by night. The glory of the LORD shone there too. In the closest parallel of all – in the passage alluded to by Saint Paul, in our first reading – Moses' face was said to shine after he spoke with God on the Holy Mountain. So much so that he had to cover it with a veil because Aaron and the Israelites were too awe struck to approach him (Exodus 34.29-35). However we choose to interpret these passages, they establish a connection between fire, light, and the nearer presence of God. No wonder Peter, John and James were terrified – so much so that they kept silent, and told no one any of the things that they had seen.

If the first thing to say about Jesus' transfiguration is that it was the moment – during his earthly life - when the glory of God

shone most clearly through him, the second thing to say is that it was, equally, the moment when the true glory of Jesus' God-given humanity – which is also yours' and mine – blazed most clearly in the world.

I cannot claim to have done much reading during the week when Anne and I were enjoying our honeymoon on Madeira. Don't ask me why! But I did dip into a recently published book of essays by one of the greatest Russian Orthodox theologians of the last century, a man called Sergius Bulgakov.

As often happens when we read the works of Orthodox theologians, we find some of the most familiar themes of western theology turned almost on their head. Writing about miracles, for example, Bulgakov refuses to accept them just as signs of God's supernatural activity intervening in the world. How can they be, he asks, because, if God needs to intervene from outside, almost like a mechanic tinkering with a faulty car, this calls in question God's providential ordering of the world. Instead, Bulgakov understands the healings Jesus performed to have been the works of his humanity quite as much as signs of his divinity. He writes,

being 'signs' of divinity, [Jesus'] miracles were also human and therefore cosmic in character, representing a revelation of man in the world . . . (*Relics and Miracles, Two Theological Essays* (2011) Grand Rapids, Michigan & Cambridge: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company)

If Bulgakov is right, Jesus' transfiguration reveals, not only the glory of God, but shows us something of the way that you and I are meant to be. This is not a new idea. Saint Paul, in the first reading, offered the startling hope that,

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3.18)

What does Paul mean?

Gerald Hoffnung, the cartoonist and musician, once produced two little books of cartoons. One was called something like, 'Drinkers', and the other the 'Symphony Orchestra'! In the drinkers' book, I remember a sketch of a tubular shaped Tyrolean gentlemen, in lederhosen, holding up a beer stein, to which he bore a striking resemblance, and a petite society lady in a hat holding a cocktail glass which mirrored her physique. Equally, in the book about the orchestra, many of the musicians had come to bear a striking resemblance to the instruments they played.

Hoffnung's cartoons are delightful trivia, but they illustrate the very ancient and powerful idea that, over time, we come to resemble whatever we place at the centre of our lives. This idea seems to have been in Saint Paul's mind, when he wrote,

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed

into the same image from one degree of glory to another;  
(2 Corinthians 3.18)

We are transfigured, transformed into the image of Christ, only as we contemplate the glory of the God reflected through his features. How does this happen?

Well, Lent begins this week – do come to one of our Ash Wednesday celebrations. For most of us the inexorable tide of business sweeps on, giving little time for additional prayer, study, or reflection – which is a shame, because Lent is meant to be a time when we simplify our routines and reflect on the central values which guide and shape our lives.

Perhaps one thing that we can all do, though – without loading ourselves with additional burdens and responsibilities – is to try to give more thought and attention to the normal pattern of our Christian lives. I don't know what you do. Maybe you set aside some time for prayer each day? Maybe you follow a scheme of Bible reading notes? Maybe you have a discipline of meditation? Maybe you plan to come to our Lent study group? Whatever we usually do, by ourselves, the one thing we all do is to gather for this service.

As I child I hated going to church – though I used to feel strangely better once the service was over! Over the years, though, maybe especially through the time that I have been part of the life of this church, I have come more and more to appreciate the time and space provided by this service. Time, simply to sit, to be caught up and enfolded in the music, to think,

to learn, to listen, and to pray. So many components, not all of which will engage each of us equally, but overall, an opportunity to get life back into perspective – to place our daily struggles and anxieties within the great context of goodness, truth, and beauty which is the life of God. In terms of health and healing, this is a most wonderful opportunity simply to relax and to be still.

Transfiguration does not happen all at once. A monk I once knew compared the monastic life to being a rough stone put in a stone polisher with a lot of other rough edged stones. “On average”, he said, “it takes fifty years for our rough corners to be smoothed off.” Slow indeed, by our standards, but God was prepared to spend 40 years teaching the Children of Israel just one truth, that they could not live by bread alone. God has all the time in the world – so long as we play our part.

And the fruits of this process, when they happen, are plain for all to see. The smile of a saint can be a transfiguring experience because we see something of the joy, and pain, and compassion of God reflected in their eyes.

We need those qualities, and the world does too.