

Transfiguration

So Peter, James and John, the hard-core disciples, are with Jesus in the mountains and they have what you might call an epiphany. And here we read that Jesus was transfigured, right in front of their eyes. I suppose transfigured means that something happens to your appearance that does not distort but transcends. They are with a character who is familiar to them, but something has happened that they did not expect. For those familiar with the Lord of the Rings, the scene is akin to the appearance of the resurrected Gandalf in the Fangorn forest. His face shines like the sun and his clothes have been washed in Daz Ultra.

But this was not a fiction. This is something that the Gospel writers tell us actually happened. Just try to imagine, without the digital technology of Hollywood. If you look at the faces around you and the clothes of real people, in real life, right here – and imagine a transfiguration. What on earth was going on? And before you can do something involuntary, two other people appear. Two Jewish men. But what I have always wanted to know is this. How on earth would you know that one of those men is called Moses, and the other is called Elijah! I suspect they probably were not wearing name tags. And yet Peter, James and John all knew without question who these characters were.

All Jewish men not present, would think themselves accursed they were not there! They would hold their manhoods cheap, in the presence of anyone who had actually witnessed Moses and Elijah in person. If I were Peter, James or John, I would probably have spent the rest of my life name-dropping. When I saw Moses ... the reason being that Moses and Elijah were two foundational characters of Jewish identity. Think of the Jewish Scriptures – in Jesus' day, they had the law and the prophets. So right there, we have Moses, who wrote the book of the law, and you have Elijah, the archetypal Jewish prophet. They represented the holy Scriptures in person.

So here they are talking to Jesus. Why? What were they talking about? Was it just for show? What was going on? And why did Peter want to pitch tents for them? I have pondered this question since the first time I read of this event. What on earth was going through his mind? If you've just been summoned up from the dead, why on earth would you need a tent?

Maybe it is simply this. That Peter, often regarded as the spokesperson of the disciples – and as such is always saying the wrong thing. My New Testament tutor at Oxford used to say that Peter only ever opened his mouth to change feet! And here, I suspect that Peter acts as a spokesperson for the whole of Israel. There is a tendency for Israel, and I suspect for humanity, to take something from God and try to keep it! Think back to Israel in the desert, when they were grumbling for food and God sent them a special kind of food called 'manna', which means, what is it. And this food came directly from God every morning. But if you tried to gather it up for yourself and keep it, it would go bad overnight and turn into worms. Or we can see even from the lips of Jesus, that servants receive gifts from their master – and the one who buries it away to keep it safely stored up is the one who's in trouble, and loses even what he thinks he has. The one who is commended is the one who uses the gold.

And so, what we have here is to do with the word of God. Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets, represented as living persons. And Peter wants to keep them, to bury them away. And then a voice thunders from heaven, "this is my son with whom I am well pleased – listen to him!" In other words, there is a similar logic here to the manna, a similar logic to using the

gold we have been given. God's word is not something locked up in a book, it is alive and active. The word of God is fulfilled and alive in the person of Jesus. The presence of Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets, with the person of Jesus shows the continuity of what we now call the Old Testament with the new. The old points to Jesus, and makes way for him. For all the rejection of him, he stands in the mainstream of Scriptural prophecy, and is the fulfilment of the law.

So why would he not be? Because as Messiah, Jesus has just announced that the son of man is to suffer many things and to be put to death. Matthew tells us that from this point on, Jesus is frequently talking about his journey to the cross and his inevitable death. Now, if you are a good bible thumping Jew, the last thing that happens to a Messiah is to be put to death by your own people! That is why Peter has just said, Lord, you are not going to be crucified – come on, you're the Messiah.

And here we are approaching the true importance of this event. The context is one of human suffering, the inevitability of the cross. Now, to anyone, that excludes altogether the possibility of glory. Glorification and Crucifixion go together like the North and South poles. They are opposites, they have nothing to do with each other. Forget theology, forget about all the stuff we know about good Christian belief. And think of real life. It is true, you cannot at the same time, endure the worst humiliation and think that you will win admiration. Suffering and Glory do not go together in a sane human mind.

But the transfiguration comes immediately after the question, 'who do you think I am', at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus is the Messiah, as Peter acknowledged, and the Messiah is going to die, as Peter refused to accept. But here, Peter, James and John have seen the humble Jesus transfigured into glory.

And here, we might just glimpse something of what those hardcore disciples witnessed: this all-too-human Jesus, glorified as God's living word to his people. This is my Son, listen to him. Forget what conceptions you have of the world, forget about how suffering and glory are incompatible, forget about thinking you have my locked up in a book – this is my Son, listen to him.

So I wonder if you ever picture Jesus, the Jesus of whom we read in the Gospels, that we worship in church, that we encounter in one another. I wonder if we ever think, actually – do you really have the power to do anything. To change anything. To make any difference in the real world. To make any difference to my life, to who I really am, to the circumstances in which I find myself.

To the circumstances in the real world. Because quite frankly it seems a long way from the mountain of transfiguration, to the children in Kenya who have witnessed their parents hacked to death with machetes in the last week. Glory and suffering belonging together? Not in Kenya, so it appears.

Or to the circumstances of our own lives. Of course, many of us have come this morning with different sets of concerns. For some there are enormous problems to face; equally for many, the greatest worry will be how to avoid eye contact when we say the grace. But for so many who do face real concern – much of that again is traceable back to human relationships and our struggle to cope with them.

In the modern world, this is a political issue that can be traced back to the religious wars that swept across Europe in the 17th century. Christianity became privatised, because it was deemed that it had caused too much trouble in public life. So it became spiritualised, confined to the upper room of your private devotion, promoted to the house of Lord's, powerless. And, beginning really with a famous book called Leviathan by Hobbes, the social contract came to define politics. Politics is no longer based upon the ideal of a good creation from which we have fallen. But the belief was that might is right – everyone is scared of death, so we need a strong central government to protect me and my rights from any who would threaten it. The human state of nature is dog eat dog, and goodness me, once God has been privatised, who will protect me in real life. Er – quick – a social contract to keep us all safe.

And before you know it a whole way of life developed where it was believed that the basic human being is an individual, and any communities to which we belong are secondary. No longer was there any conception of belonging to a body, that would shape our identity. Instead, it is us as individuals who join bodies for our own benefit. The bloodshed we see in Kenya, according to modern politics, is the best that we can hope for.

And what we celebrate at communion – is not being part of a group we have decided to join to help our individual life or give us a free ticket to heaven. At communion we celebrate that our identity is not to be found in isolation from others, who remain secondary to me. At communion we root our identity in the body of Christ, and our individual gifts and life are energised and driven by our being in Christ in this way. This meal says that the true state of humanity is communion – with one another and with God. It is a political act that undermines the legitimacy of modern politics with its foundations in individualism. Here, we encounter Christ. Here at this meal, we glimpse something of what Peter, James and John had glimpsed on the mount of transfiguration... Or do we?

What does a glorious vision have to do with the suffering of the world, and the suffering we encounter in our lives? It seems as though when real suffering comes, God is a long way off. This is the cry of the psalmist – why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? What does a transfigured Jesus have to say to human suffering? Does it sound as though I'm about to answer that question? Maybe this is as much as can be said:

That when we look at the human Jesus, we see – a human. Just as being part of the body of Christ, we witness Christ in one another, in other human beings. And it seems inconceivable that

Look at the face of Jesus
Behold the immanence and the transcendence of God.