

## The Transfiguration: Luke 9:28-36

Today, we recount the Transfiguration, where Jesus is glorified in radiant white. And an obvious parallel can be drawn here with a recent, similarly glorious, experience in dazzling whites— as our parish cricket team beat the Authors XI in a closely fought game last week!

Ok, so maybe the parallels are stretched slightly... But whenever we think of “glory,” we often do so in these terms of victory and triumph.

So, too with the disciples. Just before this passage in Luke, Jesus asks them “Who do you say I am”, to which Peter responds, “You are the Christ.” Jesus then tells them that he must undergo suffering, rejection and humiliation, and anyone who wanted to be his follower must do likewise. “Pick up your cross and follow me.”

So, when Jesus then goes up the mountain to pray with Peter, James, and John, and his divine majesty is revealed, they might be thinking “*this* is more like it.” This is what we’d expect from following the Son of God— dazzling white, Moses and Elijah for company, God’s voice booming from the cloud...

Yet even here, in this moment of almost clichéd transcendence, our understanding of glory is *subverted*. The two figures of Moses and Elijah— symbolising Jesus as the one who fulfils the Law and the Prophets, affirm Jesus’ call to “depart” to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely as the Son of God, the Ancient of Days (as Daniel puts it)— all powerful, all glorious, that Jesus submits himself to the way of the cross. In this very moment of glorification, we are being pointed towards this glory being fulfilled at *Calvary*.

Jesus does not go up the mountain to pray, for a sense of triumphant vindication. But at a crucial point in his journey- it’s as if he wants to confirm that it *truly is* God’s will for him to head to Jerusalem and the cross. A similar echo of his time praying in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night of his betrayal and arrest. As he wrestles, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

In his power and glory, Jesus freely submits himself to this path of self-sacrificial love.

The temptation, of course, is to want to hold on and possess the Jesus who is vindicated and triumphant. This is exactly what Peter wants, to freeze-frame this moment. “Lord, it is good for us to be here” he exclaims! “Let us make three dwellings”- and I love Luke’s little aside, where you can *almost hear* the tutting and eye-rolling, as he writes; “he did not know what he was saying.”

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<sup>1</sup> The word for “depart” used here *exodos*- in the Greek- meaning the road or “the way”- but we can see the link with the Exodus of a journey of trust in God and his liberation.

Peter wants to memorialise the moment, because this is the Messiah he feels most comfortable with, the unambiguously powerful Jesus, for all to see and believe!! Indeed, as we learn in Peter's later denial of Jesus— a crucified Christ is not one that's very easy to be triumphant about...

But glimpsing Jesus' glory, seeking God's presence, is never for the sake of our own self-satisfaction, or to vindicate ourselves. It is to be moved and *changed* in this pattern of self-sacrificial love.

Here the transfiguration language can be unhelpful, because although there is a transformation, it is not so much in Jesus, as in the disciples. It was not that Jesus' was given additional divine power, that he had previously lacked. The perspective that Luke's Gospel gives us is that of the disciples, not of Jesus himself, as *they* glimpse his hidden glory. Jesus is transformed *'before them'* and Moses and Elijah appear *'before them'*. The whole emphasis is on the disciples' perspective, which is recounted in 2 Peter, that they had been eyewitnesses. (count how many times 'they' or 'them' occur).

As is clear from the ending of the episode, where Jesus is alone, the point is not a change in Jesus, but a change in *their* understanding of *who he is*.

So, to glimpse the glory of God, does not mean staying static or fixed. God's glory is revealed precisely in Jesus' willingness not to stay on the mountain, but to lower himself, back down the mountain, towards Jerusalem and to the cross. Jesus' veil is pulled back, and the disciples see fully who he is, but this is not "so they can cling to him"— to recall the risen Jesus' words to Mary in the garden.

Therefore, don't worry if your journey of faith is not one of endless mountain-top experiences, and God's voice speaking to you as if from a booming cloud! It's not supposed to be. The Christian life is not one of being unchangingly caught up in a constant moment of eternal bliss. Being in the presence of the Living God, means being changed from glory to glory. So that though we ourselves might not always feel ourselves shining with the radiance of God's glory, like a magnifying glass that may feel cold to the touch, insofar as we are turned towards God's light, we can still set others ablaze.

So perhaps a good image of the Christian life and prayer life, is not that of being atop of a mountain, but in the disciples struggling to "stay awake." Let us, with the disciples be alert and attentive to the veil of God's glory being lifted in our everyday lives; signs of hope and life bursting through even in the bleakest situations.

In a parallel with Gethsemane, it is interesting that here the disciples could *not* stay awake whilst Jesus prayed. And shortly after, at his arrest, they all fled,

failing to see how this moment of his torture and death could ever be a revelation of his glory.

Prayer is exactly this attentiveness to what God is doing in us and in the world around us. Some have likened it to birdwatching; most of the time prayer can feel like sitting, waiting, with not much going on or happening. Then suddenly, there is a kingfisher flash of something divine, which changes the landscape.

Or, to return to a cricket analogy, like slip-catcher or fielder. As Matthew and Peyman, said after their first cricket match, it can be quite confusing... You wait, ready, for each ball, even if it might feel like you're just standing around with not much happening, suddenly there is a brilliant moment, and everything changes, because you were awake, expectant and actively waiting.

So too Lord, may we stay awake to your glory in our midst. Open our hearts and our eyes, that we may see your glory, and so be changed to radiate this glory in our own lives.

Amen.