

A Sermon for the Feast of the Transfiguration
Preached at St George's Round Church, 2017, By Benjamin Lee

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

At the center of the Transfiguration story in our Gospel today, is an extraordinary vision and voice on the holy mount, concerning Jesus. The scene is a marvelous revelatory event, of which Peter, James and John are witnesses: for a moment, in the face of Jesus, through his body, and his garments, the light of truth is manifest before them; then, out of the bright cloud of God's presence, a voice proclaims this Jesus to be the Father's beloved Son, who, in accord with His will, speaks with His authority. The three disciples behold the dazzling majesty and glory of God in the very flesh of Jesus, and thereby recognize his true identity as the eternally begotten Word of the Father.

St John in his own Gospel does not record a discrete transfiguration event as do the other evangelists—despite his having been actually present. Yet he puts his finger on what he and the other two eyewitnesses on that momentous day of theological disclosure surely perceived: *The Word (of God) became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, the glory as of the only Son of the Father.*¹ The transfiguration was a theophany, a vision of God's glory which appeared in the human flesh of Jesus.

For his own part, St Matthew introduces his account of the transfiguration by mentioning that Jesus led the three up into the high mountain *After six days . . .*² That is, he deliberately points us backwards in his narrative to the occasion, we recall, of Jesus' question, *Whom say ye that I am?* and Peter's confession, that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of the living God.*³

This true confession of Jesus as the anointed of God, which was itself revealed *not by flesh and blood, but, says Jesus, by my father which is in heaven,*⁴ is now confirmed by the miracle of Jesus' bodily transfiguration, by the appearance of the Moses and Elijah, and by the divine voice out of the cloud.

For when the scripture says that *Jesus' face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light, . . . and a bright cloud overshadowed them,*⁵ the disciples did not thereby apprehend an appearance of corporeal light, perceivable by ordinary senses. Rather, the nature of that light was extraordinary, and has been regarded, especially among the Greek Fathers of the church, as a figure of the grace of heaven shining through the veil of flesh and cloud. Jesus' transfiguration revealed his divine

¹ Jn 1:14.

² Mt 17:1.

³ Mt 16:15-16.

⁴ Mt 16:17.

⁵ Mt 17:2, 5.

nature to the three disciples, insofar as they were able to apprehend it, and it showed the indwelling of God within him. That light was, as the later Byzantine tradition would perceive, the Divine Light: it was the radiant splendour of the uncreated energies of God. Again, the prologue of John's Gospel articulates the principle here at work: *In him was life and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*⁶ Jesus was transfigured "not taking upon himself something new or being changed into something new, nor something which formerly he did not possess. Rather, it was to show his disciples that which he already was, opening their eyes and bringing them from blindness to sight."⁷ Paradoxically, in the transfiguration, what conceals the radiance of divine glory—Christ's flesh, his garments, the cloud—is precisely the means of its self-manifestation. The flesh which conceals divinity is the same flesh which reveals divinity. For Christ's fleshly body is not annihilated in the appearance of his glorious, spiritual body, but rather it becomes, as it were, translucent to the divinity with which it is united. The disciples saw in the face of Christ the icon of the Father's glory.

Next, the appearance of Moses and Elijah at Jesus' side, talking with him, also confirms this testimony. For these two great figures represent, respectively, the Law and the Prophets. Remember Jesus' own words in the Sermon on the Mount: *Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.*⁸ The Law and the Prophets made known the salvation history of Israel; yet the scriptures were all the while pointing to the advent of Christ; the written word of God to his people was all the while pointing to the anointed of God, that would come in the flesh to live among us, to redeem us and make us a new creation.

Finally, the voice out of the cloud of the divine presence confirms in yet a third sense who Jesus is: *this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.*⁹ This of course echoes the earlier voice from heaven, at Jesus' baptism, when he was anointed by *the Spirit of God, descending like a dove, and lighting upon him.*¹⁰ As the beloved son of the heavenly Father, he is also the eternally begotten Word of God. The words of Jesus are utterances from the Father, and carry the Father's divine authority. Jesus himself *speaks* the Word of God, and *is* the Word of God. His life, death, resurrection and ascension articulate the movement of the Word's procession from and return to the Father. In that Word is accomplished the creation and redemption of all things. We neglect to hear that Word, or we fail to heed it, at our own peril. When we to refuse to hear the Son of God—the teaching, calling, and command of him who not only preached along the shores of Galilee, but who was with God in the beginning and himself spoke the world into being—we find ourselves inevitably frustrated and at odds with the cosmic order of creation and

⁶ Jn 1:4-5.

⁷ Gregory of Palamas, "Sermon on the Transfiguration."

⁸ Mt 5:17.

⁹ Mt 17:5.

¹⁰ Mt 3:17.

redemption. Not to heed that Word is to deny the divine calling of our humanity, our eternally purposed vocation, our very life.

Here is where Christ's transfiguration pertains especially to us. For the mystery of the transfiguration is not only a dialectic of revelation and concealment pertaining to Christ's humanity taken up into divinity. It also points to the mystery of our *own* humanity, and of our *own* deification. In Jesus' shining face and garments, the eternal destiny of the saints is made manifest. To this end, Jesus taught his disciples, that even the *righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*.¹¹ St John, too, tells us, *We do not know what we shall be, but we know that we shall be like him*.¹² The transfiguration is an anticipation of Christ's glorious second coming, when he *will change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body*.¹³ And again St Paul: *We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory*.¹⁴ The vision of Christ's transfigured flesh is a glimpse not only of who Jesus Christ himself is, but also of the future glory of the resurrection of the body which God has prepared for each of us in Christ.

We cannot see Christ as he is in his glory, unless we ourselves are changed. We must become like him: we must be partakers of that light; we, too, must be transfigured. But how is this possible, what does it require?

Thus far, we have considered how Matthew's account of the transfiguration harkens back to the confession of St Peter, in identifying Jesus as *the Christ, the son of the living God*. The transfiguration on the holy mount thus confirms the truth of that confession, and elaborates its significance. Crucially, however, Matthew's Gospel also tells us, that from the day Peter confessed Jesus *began to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised again the third day*.¹⁵ In this context, Jesus' ascent with his three closest disciples of the "high mountain" of his transfiguration anticipates his ascent of Calvary, the mountain of his passion and death. All that we have recounted about the sudden brilliance of light manifested in Jesus' transfiguration thus stands in stark contrast to the adumbration of his self-sacrifice, his experience of suffering and death, the terrible encroaching darkness of Gethsemany and Calvary. Even the Law and the Prophets, as we know, announced the Messiah's sufferings that were to come. Indeed, the goodness of divine providence ordained that the Son of God would reign and triumph not in worldly might and power, but in suffering love. The ancient hymn of Fortunatus, *Vexilla regis prodeunt*, which we often sing in Passiontide, puts it beautifully:

The royal banners forward go,

¹¹ Mt 13:43.

¹² Jn 3:2.

¹³ Phil 3:21.

¹⁴ I Cor 3:18.

¹⁵ Mt 16:21.

The Cross shines forth in mystic glow,
Where he, the Life did death endure,
And by that death did life procure.

... Fulfilled is all his words foretold:
Then spread the banners, and unfold
Love's crowning power, that all may see
He reigns and triumphs from the Tree.¹⁶

That path of suffering love, of enduring many trials and persecutions, demands that we turn away from the path of self-preservation: it is the difficult road of our heart's pilgrimage, the glorious way of the cross, where true blessedness is to be found.

So if we are to hear and obey our Lord, what word does he have for us? The lesson Jesus had in fact been teaching the disciples just six days before the transfiguration was a hard one, a lesson the disciples surely had not then understood about the cost of following him: *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.*¹⁷

The transfiguration of our souls and bodies presupposes the way of the cross, which is the way of self-denial, of ascetical struggle, of suffering love; indeed it requires the purification, conversion, reformation—the transfiguration—of all our loves, so that our whole selves may be made fit for the heavenly life; so that our desires might be rightly ordered to eternal things; so that we might lead godly lives and participate in the very life of God. Are we prepared so to suffer and die, in order to enter into the kingdom of God, to enter into glory?

None of this is possible for us—except by grace. As it was for the Apostles who prostrated themselves in fear and trembling before the awesome presence of God, so it is for us this day, in the sacrament of the Holy Communion: we do not presume to come to his table, trusting in our own righteousness; but Christ, in his manifold and great mercies, draws near to us, and touches us, and bids us to himself: Let us hear his voice, his words of comfort and courage to the penitent: *Arise, be not afraid.*¹⁸

O God, who on the holy mount didst reveal to chosen witnesses thy well-beloved Son wonderfully transfigured: mercifully grant unto us such a vision of his divine majesty, that we, being purified and strengthened by thy grace, may be transformed into his likeness from glory to glory; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. +

¹⁶ Trans. Canon Percy Dearmer in *The Book of Common Praise* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1938), 123.

¹⁷ Mt 16:24-25.

¹⁸ Mt 17:7.