

2 March 2019

Infinite Resource (Luke 9: 28-43)

Transfiguration

© Sarah Bachelard

I read my first Harry Potter book at the ripe old age of about 35 and loved it. While fellow members of my then bookclub thought it rather childish, I was captivated by J.K. Rowling's brilliant evocation of a wizarding world existing in and around our more pedestrian, non-wizarding or 'Muggle' realm. The thought, for example, that you might catch the train to Hogwart's, the school for young wizards, at platform 9 and three-quarters at King's Cross Station, or purchase your wand in Diagon Alley – a busy shopping street completely invisible to Muggles just behind Charing Cross Road – generated a tantalising sense of there being 'another world', a hidden reality just on the other side of things, one that's shinier, more exciting, more powerful than the reality we inhabit. The idea that what we see isn't all there is, that there's a 'more', and you just have to go through the worm-hole or out the back of the wardrobe or pierce the veil and you'll find it – it's a persistent theme in our cultural imagination and (I confess) it's a theme I find profoundly attractive!

The story of the event we call 'the Transfiguration' evokes something of this same dynamic, a sense of there being a reality that's usually hidden but is now suddenly glimpsed, revealed. It suggests something more's going on in the midst of the world we know – as if there's an infinite resource into which we might tap, if only we discovered the key, the point of access. Except ... here's the problem. Almost no one past the age of 10 thinks the wizarding world of Harry Potter actually exists. It's 'fantasy' – a fictional space into which we can escape for a time from the mundanity of our Muggle-lives, and be freed from the limits and constraints of ordinary, material life. It answers to the seemingly in-built human desire to project ourselves beyond our finite existence, but it is *just* a story. Why should we think the world

glimpsed in the story of the Transfiguration any different? Isn't this what critics of religion charge? We'd all like to think there's something 'more', a deeper reality to perceive and from which to live. But it's a childish dream – attractive yes, but ultimately unreal. Or is it?

The Transfiguration comes at a profound turning point – a crisis – in the gospel narrative. Jesus has recently asked his disciples to say who they think he is and elicited Peter's confession, 'You are the Messiah of God'. Jesus has then begun to teach them, against all their messianic expectations, that he 'must undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... and ... killed, and on the third day be raised' (Luke 9:22). He warns them that if they want to keep following him, they too must be prepared to lose their lives. '[T]hose who want to save their life will lose it', he says, 'and those who lose their life for my sake will save it' (Luke 9: 24).

Then, about eight days after saying these things, Luke writes, Jesus went up the mountain to pray, taking with him Peter, John and James. While they're up there, something extraordinary happens – some glimpse of unimaginable light, some breaking through the veil that separates the living from the dead, some terrifying overshadowing. And then it's over. They come back down the mountain – and life resumes seemingly as before. The crowds clustering around, requesting healing; though now, like a bass note continuing ominously to sound, Jesus insists they remember, they *let in* what's he's told them: 'Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands'. They don't get it, of course. Nevertheless, within a few verses, as Luke tells it, Jesus 'sets his face to go to Jerusalem'. The journey to the cross has begun in earnest. The experience of the opening into another world is bounded on both sides by Jesus' acknowledgement of and movement towards his own death.

It seems important also to note that this isn't some generic encounter with the numinous. It's an encounter with the God of Israel. The story of the Transfiguration powerfully evokes the remembrance of Moses going up Mount Sinai,

coming down 'with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand', his face shining because he'd been speaking with God. As Luke has it, Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah concerns a second liberation of God's people. 'They were speaking', Luke writes, 'of his 'departure' (that is, his 'exodus'), 'which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem'.¹ In terms of Israel's symbol system, in other words, Jesus and his disciples are undergoing the fullest possible affirmation of his divine identity and mission.

And Orthodox theologians emphasise that it's surely no accident that Peter, James and John, who will be with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, are the three given to be with him as he's transfigured. 'Peter, James and John are allowed to see Christ's glory', we're told, 'so that when they witness his anguish and death they may know that these terrible moments are freely embraced ... and held within the infinite depth of life'.² Except they nearly missed it altogether, so weighed down with sleep they were. But, says Luke, since they had stayed awake (or, according to another possible translation, 'when they were fully awake'), they saw his glory' (9:32).

I said earlier that the imaginative sense of there being 'another world', a hidden reality just on the other side of things, that's shinier, more exciting, more powerful than the reality we inhabit is a persistent feature of our cultural imagination. This prompts the question whether the narrative of the Transfiguration is of same ilk – just one more consoling 'fantasy' that gilds mundane reality and causes us to evade some hard truths. But what if it's the other way round? What if we have a deep intuition – a kind of knowing that there *is* a depth dimension to things in which our ordinary life is sourced, from which we receive our fullest meaning? Perhaps that's why we love these kinds of stories. And if that's so, then it suggests the questions we really need to be asking are not whether such a realm

¹ When Jesus is named as God's Son, the words 'listen to him', which come from the cloud, repeat the divine instructions 'concerning the prophet like Moses' in the book of Deuteronomy (18:15). Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.161.

² Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2003), pp.10-11.

exists, but how we tell the difference between falsifying and true accounts of it, how we open our lives to the real thing.

If these questions are closer to the mark, it seems to me that the story of the Transfiguration offers vital touchstones for discerning our way here. For one thing, it suggests that when we truly encounter the deep life of the world, it doesn't take us away from the ordinary, but returns us to it changed. It doesn't lead us to evade life's suffering but enables us to bear it differently, to dwell amidst what is with radical hope and love, bringing the promise of that infinite and liberating resource into the life we share. Think of Jesus come back down the mountain, healing the child whose possession had defeated the disciples. He's frustrated by how blocked they remain, how unable to channel the divine energy he's seeking to communicate with them – 'you faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I bear with you?' Yet still he calls them to follow, to learn to become bearers with him of the light of God shining *in* the darkness, setting life free from within.

But how? Well, to access Narnia, you have to walk through the wardrobe; to enter Diagon Alley, you have to tap three times on a brick in the pub called 'The Leaky Cauldron'. To perceive and begin to share in the life of God, Luke says, you just need to wake up. And waking up is essentially connected to prayer. It was when Jesus was praying that 'the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white'. Over and over again, Luke insists on this connection between prayer and the open heaven – at the baptism, at the transfiguration, in the garden. Mostly, we won't find ourselves suddenly endowed with supernatural powers. But in the practice of radical prayer, we are changed, transfigured. Faces do begin to shine. Laurence Freeman says that when you meditate regularly, you become better looking – and I've seen this happen. It's hard to pinpoint, but there's a softening, a gentling, a glow. And it's not just about external appearance – because something is happening on the inside too – a deepening serenity and integrity, the stability and courage to go where we must go.

It's always important to ask whether our religion, the stories of our faith are just consoling fantasies – magical tales told to assuage our fear of the dark. But the story of the Transfiguration is one whose truth we can test for ourselves. The experience of a depth dimension to reality is one we can know for ourselves. How we do this is by opening ourselves to prayer as Jesus did; letting go self-preoccupation and handing ourselves over ever more fully in faith. Perhaps for most of us it won't occur as a dramatic encounter, a sudden illumination – more like a slowly dawning sense of being met, changed, enabled. But either way, the more we seek to inhabit our world's darkness in the company of Jesus – to live from and shed abroad his loving, liberating light – the more we play our part in making this hidden reality visible, this transformed possibility-for-being available, to all of us Muggles here on earth.