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Transfiguration (Luke 9. 28-36)

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The Transfiguration of Jesus is a favourite subject for the icons of the Eastern Orthodox church. These icons have a standard form. Jesus is pictured at the peak of a great, craggy mountain, wearing clothes of dazzling white, with rays of light emanating from his body. Often he's standing in the midst of a great dark circle or mandala (a bit like a full body halo), a circle which symbolises the mystery of God out of which he comes. Moses and Elijah stand on either side of Jesus on slightly lower peaks, and then a long way below, down the mountain side, Peter, James and John are depicted falling backwards down the hill, tumbling in confusion, awe and terror.

As many of you will know, the icons of the Eastern church are a distinct kind of art form. Unlike much Western art, they're not intended as portraits or realistic representations of events. Rather, they point – by means of particular conventions – to a reality which is essentially *beyond* representation. They are signs, pointers to a reality which breaks through into our experience, but which always transcends and disrupts that experience. You can see how this makes the Transfiguration an ideal subject for an icon. In this event, transcendent reality breaks in upon disciples. They glimpse something that's at the edge of their capacity to grasp or even be present to, stay awake to, and then suddenly the glimpse is gone.

Yet the early church understood this brief and unrepresentable experience to be pivotal in the story of Jesus. It's recorded in all three synoptic gospels and comes straight after Jesus first speaks about his death. It's marks a turning point, the beginning of Jesus' deliberate journey towards the Cross.

And just as the Transfiguration is an apt subject for an icon, so the gospels 'write' the story of the Transfiguration in an 'iconic' kind of way – full of symbols and signs pointing beyond mere factual narration. We're invited to 'read' it at several levels, with an eye to the density of its meaning.

To begin, there's the location of the event in time. 'Now about eight days after these sayings', writes Luke, apparently casually, 'Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray'. But there's nothing casual here. In the Hebrew imagination, seven is the number of completion, wholeness. God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day God rested. So if seven signifies the completion of creation, then the number eight represents the beginning of the new creation. So Luke is primarily concerned, not with the *chronological* time at which Jesus went up the mountain, but the *theological* time. Interestingly, in the gospels of Matthew and Mark it's written that 'six days later' Jesus went up the mountain, and here the number signals the entrance into the joy and fullness of the seventh day. Either way, as Rowan Williams has said, 'From early times, commentators have said that [the timing attributed to the story] is an allusion to the days of creation: the transfiguration is the climax of the creative work of God'.¹

A second thing to notice in the iconography of the Transfiguration story is the role of mountain tops and clouds. The mount of the Transfiguration is reminiscent of the great biblical mountains, Sinai and Carmel, where God appeared to Moses and Elijah respectively. It's on Sinai, that the voice of God calls Moses, a cloud descends, and he receives the tablets of the law and instructions for building the ark of the covenant which is how God will come to dwell in the midst of the people. In the Elijah story, it's on Mt Carmel that the prophets of Baal are defeated and the God of Israel revealed as the one true God. On this mountain, the people of Israel recognise that the idols they've been worshipping are indeed idols: they fall on their faces and say, 'The Lord indeed is God, the Lord indeed is God' (1 Kings 18.39).

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2003), p.8.

The Transfiguration story references both these ancient texts. It's the same God who spoke to Moses, who speaks again from the cloud. And recognising the voice of the true and living God, the disciples fall to the ground. What the event reveals then is not only something about *Jesus*, but something about *God* – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses and Elijah, is the Father of this Son. From henceforth, God must be understood with reference to, in the light of this human life: 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'

And this brings us to the significance of the presence of Moses and Elijah themselves. Why them? Why not Abraham or Sarah or Jacob? The reason is that Moses represents, in the Hebrew imagination, the law, and Elijah the prophets. Jesus has told his disciples that he has come not to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfil them (Matthew 5.17; Luke 24.44). There's fundamental continuity here. In the Transfiguration, Jesus is seen talking to Moses and Elijah, his face shining with divine radiance, his coming journey about to fulfil all they had taught of God.

Like an icon, then, the symbolic density of the Transfiguration story represents the fullness of the meaning of Jesus – Jesus as Son of God, as Messiah, as fulfilment of the law and the prophets; Jesus as God with us completing creation, and initiating the new. If this had been all the disciples experienced in the Transfiguration event, it would be extraordinary enough. But what happens next is even more surprising, even more revelatory of the divine nature. Jesus comes back down the mountain and resumes his ministry of teaching and healing. He continues his journey towards death, in obscurity, anonymity and misunderstanding. The next day, according Luke, once he's back down the mountain, Jesus says again to his disciples: "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands". But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it' (Luke 9. 44-45).

In the Transfiguration we see the power of God in dazzling light and that Jesus comes from and belongs to this power. And then we see how this power works – not

by *overwhelming* human reality with its brightness, not by imposing itself upon us by mighty and irresistible force, but from within our human experience, slowly, companionably and patiently. The power of Jesus, the power of God, is the power of transformation working from within. As John's gospel puts it, it is light shining within the darkness, like a seed growing silently, unrecognised, deep under the earth.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has written that this is 'the message of the cross' – evil, suffering and alienation 'may only be overcome from *within*, not from above'. This means that faith sourced in the life and work of Jesus is 'a faith that enables its disciples to follow the crucified God into the heart of the world's darkness, into the very kingdom of death, and to look for light that shines *in* the darkness'.² In other words, there are no short cuts to the transformation of creation, even for God. Restoring broken relationships, undoing the power of hatred and fear, releasing those who are captive to any kind of unfreedom – none of this happens by magic, by God just waving a wand. It happens because in the person of Jesus, God enters into the darkness, fear and violence of the world, to liberate, forgive and heal. And we are invited, we are called to follow him there.

This week, on Wednesday, the season of Lent begins ... the liturgical enactment of Jesus' journey towards his death, and the apparent victory of the powers of darkness. For me and I know for many of you, this week has seemed particularly dark for our community – the news of the High Court decision allowing for the return of asylum seekers to Nauru; the news of cuts to climate science at CSIRO are just two faces of our struggle to imagine and commit to a truly common good. To 'read' the Transfiguration story at depth is to glimpse the magnitude, compassion and creativity of God's life and our call to participate in it. May the experience of this light illumine our Lenten journey, and deepen our commitment to join with Christ in the midst of darkness, for the healing and communion of our world.

² Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p.32.

