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## **Transfiguring Light (Mark 9. 2-9)**

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I love the liturgical calendar. It organises the church's year into feasts and seasons, and offers a structure, a rhythm for our worship week by week and from one year to the next. Not all Christian churches organise their time and their communal worship in this way. Though it reflects Jewish liturgical tradition and is sourced in remembrance of salvation history, this way ordering of ecclesial time was severely pruned by some of the Protestant reformers (who were particularly keen on removing many of the saints days) and sometimes abandoned altogether. I once heard of someone attending a Protestant-minded Anglican church on the south coast one Christmas, only to encounter *not* a celebration of the feast of the incarnation, but the 9<sup>th</sup> week of the rector's 12 week series on human sexuality. It's possible to plough on with one's own agenda through most things!

Of course it's not the only way we can focus our attention in worship, or tell the story of our faith and sometimes it's necessary to engage a particular community's situation 'out of season', as it were. But, in addition to the fact that it helps save us from the private hobby horses of clergy, what I love about the liturgical calendar is its reminder that Christian faith is more like a drama to be performed, than it is like an argument to be persuaded by or a set of propositions to believe.

The words, 'drama', 'performance' can have negative connotations – as if we're talking about something pretend, made up, play-acted. But understanding our faith story as a drama to be performed isn't saying it's make-believe – it's saying that we are invited to participate in it, to become part of the action – actors. We don't just read about the story of Jesus as history, theory, a collection of wisdom sayings or

divine commandments – but we are immersed bodily in it and are changed by it. By means of the liturgical calendar, with its sequencing of events, its seasons of preparation and celebration, we enter into the time of the gospel story with our lives (in *our* time). We are affected by its shifting mood and energy, helped along by seasonal colours, songs, foods and prayer – surprised, sustained, challenged, led to awareness of deeper and deeper layers of meaning. We are offered the opportunity to participate in the journey of discipleship as a live encounter year by year, rather than remaining as devoted onlookers of a dead past.

What's more, the liturgical calendar brings to the surface, sometimes in very powerful ways, the inner dynamics of this drama of faith. It juxtaposes particular remembrances or connects events in ways that make possible a deeper discernment of their meaning. This strikes me as a profound gift from our tradition. This week offers a prime instance of it.

Since just after Christmas, we've been in the season of Epiphany which focuses the church's testimony that the divine life has appeared, been made visible, manifested in the human life of Jesus. The readings set for Epiphany are to do with light, illumination, recognition and insight – the Magi following the star and recognising the new-born Jesus as king; Jesus' baptism and the revelation of his divine paternity from the open heaven; the presentation of the Christ-child in the temple and the testimony of the aged Simeon, 'my eyes have seen your salvation ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'. We've heard the calling of the first disciples, including Philip's testimony in John's gospel 'We have found the Messiah' and Jesus' promise to Nathanael that, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'. For those who have eyes to see, the readings from this season insist, Jesus is visible as the very presence of God. And tonight, Epiphany culminates with the feast of the Transfiguration – the divine light shining unmistakably, unmissably

from the person of Jesus, his clothes a ‘dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them’.

Yet – and here’s the radical liturgical juxtaposition – within days of this glorious vision, we will plunge into the season of Lent, the journey to the cross, the light seemingly on the way out of the world, quenched by the world’s darkness. It seems to me that this abrupt juxtaposition of Epiphany with Lent, of transfiguring light with looming darkness, teaches us something very significant about our discipleship of this Jesus, our participation in his way.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the transfiguration story is introduced with the apparently innocent words ‘six days later’, and in Luke’s version it says, ‘after about eight days’. Rowan Williams points out that ‘From early times, commentators have said that this is an allusion to the days of creation: the transfiguration is the climax of the creative work of God, either the entrance into the joy and repose of the seventh day or the beginning of the new creation [the eighth day], depending on what kind of symbolism you want to use’.<sup>1</sup> The story comes at the turning point of the gospel, just after Peter has confessed Jesus as Messiah and Jesus has begun to say he must suffer and die – the turning point of the gospel, the cusp of the new creation.

What happens? Peter, James and John (who Jesus has led ‘up a high mountain apart, by themselves’) encounter a light that is not of this world. They see Jesus transfigured, utterly transparent to, shot through with the divine light. In his light, dimensions of reality are made visible that they cannot normally see. In icons of this scene, Williams says, the light shining out from Jesus is reflected on the robes of his companions, Moses and Elijah, and it is in this light that Peter, James and John see them. ‘There appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking to Jesus’.

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

This is a vision which confuses our ordinary sense of time – Moses and Elijah after all lived hundreds of years before Jesus. Williams suggests that, in Jesus, ‘the world of ordinary prosaic time is not destroyed, but it is broken up and reconnected, it works no longer just in straight lines but in layers and spirals of meaning’.<sup>2</sup> And because of this, ‘We begin to understand how our lives, like those of Moses and Elijah, may have meanings we can’t know of in this present moment: the real depth and significance of what we say or do now won’t appear until more of the light of Christ has been seen ... Christ’s light alone will make the final pattern coherent, for each one of us as for all human history’.<sup>3</sup>

So there’s a lot going on in that brief glimpse on the mountain top – the dazzling, terrifying light revealing the God-saturatedness of Jesus, the deep seeing made possible into a reality in which the dead are contemporary and alive, the meaning of our lives held in God, beyond what we control or make. And then, it’s gone. ‘Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus’. Not (it seems) dazzling white Jesus, but just ordinary Jesus, Jesus on the way down the mountain, continuing the journey that will lead them to Jerusalem, and us through Lent.

And yet, things are not the same – not quite. Transfiguration, the vision of eternity, doesn’t avert suffering, anguish and death. But it gives us a sense of the larger reality by which they are encompassed. Orthodox theology insists that it is no accident that it is Peter, James and John, who were to be with Jesus in Gethsemane, who were chosen by him to witness the Transfiguration. They are given that vision to sustain them with the knowledge that the anguish of the garden, the betrayal and death are ‘freely embraced’ by God ‘and held within the infinite depth of divine life’.<sup>4</sup>

There are ways of speaking about this divine ‘holding’ of human suffering – Jesus’ and ours – that seem cheap, glib, offering false consolation. Yet, strangely I

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Dwelling of the Light*, 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Dwelling of the Light*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Dwelling of the Light*, 10-11.

think, this is just the risk that the liturgical juxtaposition of Epiphany and Lent, Transfiguration and Crucifixion, demands we run. Performing our faith, living as faithfully as we can from the inside of this reality, calls us into the strange double vision of the disciples. We may not have been dazzled by divine light, but in Jesus we have at least glimpsed a depth to reality that is not determined by 'this world', the possibility of our lives sourced in a different place. And yet, we live mostly 'down the mountain', in varying degrees of exposure to loneliness, frustration, fear, anguish and threat. Can we experience these differently? 'Faith in Jesus', says Williams, 'appears to mean that we have to live in the world with all its risks, our lives open to the depths from which Jesus lives'.<sup>5</sup> What might this look like for you? What might a concrete expression of faith in those depths be – letting go of a complaint against the universe, taking a stand for something, practising delight even in the midst of grief? What might taking the experience of Transfiguration into our Lenten journey mean for you this year? It's the gift our calendar is offering.

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Dwelling of the Light*, 16.