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Transfiguration: Is not this the carpenter's son? (Mark 9. 2-10; John 6. 41-42)

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Let me begin with a story that links these readings we have just heard: one set for the Feast of the Transfiguration (August 6) and the second, an extract from the reading set for this 11th Sunday after Pentecost, and part of the Bread of Life Discourse.

In 2015, as part of a Holy Land Pilgrimage Tour, I visited the Franciscan Church of the Transfiguration which is located on Mt Tabor. Twenty-six of us packed into a small chapel for a celebration of the Eucharist. (It certainly wouldn't have complied with COVID guidelines for social distancing!) When it came to the prayer of consecration, our priest-guide Father Kamahl, without warning, broke into Aramaic, Jesus' mother tongue and the language he would have used at the last Supper. One minute we were hearing English, the next the language that the first disciples heard. More than two thousand years dissolved. And in a sense so did I. When it came to receiving communion, using a 4th Century Byzantine rite, Father Kamahl said to each of us, 'Become what you receive', and we each answered, 'The Body of Christ'. Such an invitation and such a response takes us into the heart of the divine mystery, and a lifetime may be insufficient to unpack its meaning.

Both readings address the question of who Jesus is, although the audience and mode are different. The John reading tells us that '[t]he Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ... Is not this the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' (Jn 6: 41-42). This was the same sort of reaction Jesus received in Luke 4 when, fresh out of the wilderness, he had stood up to read in the synagogue a passage beginning, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...' In both cases we can hear the indignant protest, 'Who does he think he is?'

All three synoptic gospels point out that the Transfiguration occurs six days after Peter's inspired declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. In this respect it is hard not to see the Transfiguration as a sequel to the earlier event – a powerful (miraculous?) visual confirmation of Peter's answer to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?'

Tonight we have listened to Mark's version of what happened. We have heard how Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain 'apart by themselves', and how he was transfigured before them. We can only imagine their disorientation and amazement – let's face it, sheer terror – when everyday barriers of space and time were dissolved, and Moses and Elijah appeared alongside Jesus.

Peter's suggestion, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah,' reflects perhaps the human desire to domesticate mystery – to cut it down to manageable size. Or perhaps as the song suggests, he just wants to make the moment last. Instead, a cloud overshadows them and a voice says – in the same words as used at Jesus' baptism – 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.' Then as suddenly as they had appeared, Moses and Elijah disappear. It is time to descend, and as they do so, Jesus warns the disciples to tell no one until 'after the Son of Man had been raised from the dead'. Just imagine how hard it would be to have the experience and be told not to discuss it. Perhaps they talked about it among themselves on their way down the hill.

Andrew King, poetic lectionary blogger¹, reflects on what the disciples might have felt and thought when the cloud lifted, the vision faded and earth and sky resumed their customary appearance. He writes:

*The figure that shone
is Jesus again: the sun-browned skin
and the carpenter hands
and the feet, like yours, grimed with earth.
Gone the others you thought you saw.*

¹ Andrew King, 2019, 'As You Leave the Hill', A Poetic Kind of Place, earth2earth.wordpress.com

*Silent now the voice, the words
a memory like the calm
that follows strong wind.*

*And already Jesus has turned
and is leading back down the hill,
down to the stone and dust
and the sorrows and sighs of the everyday world.*

(Andrew King, 'As You Leave the Hill, 2019)

So what, over 2000 years later, are we to make of this story? One way to read it is as an initiation or liminal space narrative. Andrew Mayes² suggests how well the three stages of liminal experience apply to the Transfiguration. The first stage is separation from business-as-usual – the drawing apart to ascend the mountain. In Luke's version this was for the specific purpose of praying, and it was while Jesus was praying that 'the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white' (Luke 9: 29). This takes them to the middle stage – the transformative experience itself. What would the disciples have made of the sudden appearance alongside the transfigured Jesus, of Moses, deliverer and lawgiver, and Elijah the prophet? Would they have remembered how Moses' face also shone after he had gone up to meet God on Mt Sinai (Ex: 34:35) so that he needed to veil himself?

And the third stage is the return (or descent from the mountain) to join their community, hopefully reflecting something of the experience, though forbidden to speak about it. So how transformative was this experience for these disciples? The fact that later in the same chapter, Jesus catches the disciples arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, strikes a cautionary note. Even a profound spiritual experience like this one does not automatically translate into insight or character transformation.

Another helpful way of looking at the Transfiguration is as an epiphany narrative. By that I mean the account of a moment of sudden revelation or

² Andrew Mayes, 2013, *Beyond the Edge: Spiritual Transitions for Adventurous Souls*, SPCK.

realisation, involving both a sudden manifestation and perception of the essential nature or meaning of something. Michael Guite, in his sonnet called 'Transfiguration', describes such an experience as a 'glimpse of how things really are' when 'The daily veil that covers the sublime/ in darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet'.³

Transfiguration

*For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are. (Malcolm Guite)*

'The Love that dances at the heart of things ... that glimpse of how things really are', that sense of being both 'in and out of time', of something deep within leaping up in quickened response to something or someone – all attempts to capture the idea of epiphany. His concluding lines, 'Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar/Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are', are a reminder of the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness not overcoming it (John 1: 5).

We may never have a vision like this one, but we have probably experienced times when something within us has leapt in glad recognition of some beauty or goodness we have seen in the world of nature or people. Poets and other creative artists help us to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. And so does a contemplative practice of being open to finding the divine hidden in all people and all things,

³ Malcolm Guite, 'Transfiguration', malcolmguite.wordpress.com

including ourselves. Elizabeth Barrett Browning suggests we are surrounded by opportunities to see the divine, if only we have eyes to see and respond:

*Earth's crammed with heaven
and every common bush afire with God;
but only the one who sees, takes off his shoes;
the rest sit round and pluck blackberries.⁴*

Not that there is anything wrong with picking blackberries *per se* – nor in making blackberry jam or blackberry pies for that matter. And it is not about importing God to the experience. God is already there and speaks from the bush itself. It is enough that we pay attention and take off our shoes in acknowledgement. How earthy and grounded is that!

But some epiphanies are less exuberant. There are times where liminal space is not chosen but thrust on us by life's challenges or our own vulnerabilities. How many of us at such times have sought solace in Paul's paradoxical words: 'My strength is made perfect in weakness'? RS Thomas, Welsh poet and priest, in a poem called 'When we are weak', describes what happens when we not only find solace but courage to turn aside, to come as we are, to go within, to face our darkness and poverty. It is then we may find that 'somewhere /within us the bush /burns' and 'uninvited the guest comes'.⁵ He writes:

*When we are weak, we are
strong. When our eyes close
on the world, then somewhere
within us the bush
burns. When we are poor
and aware of the inadequacy of our table, it is to that
uninvited the guest comes.*

(RS Thomas, 'When we are weak', in Roger Housden (ed), *For Lovers of God Everywhere*, p.142)

May it be so.

⁴ Accessed from goodreads.com

⁵ Roger Housden, 2009, *For Lovers of God Everywhere: Poems of the Christian Mystics*, Hay House.