

Veiled in Flesh (Matthew 17. 1-9)

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Those of you familiar with the calendar of the Christian year will recognise the significance of the reading we just heard for the shape of the whole. In the gospel story, in the narrative of Jesus' life, this episode known as 'the Transfiguration' is part of a key transition. Up till this point, Jesus has been out and about, ranging the length and breadth of modern day Israel-Palestine – from Judea in the south, to Galilee in the north and even further north into present day Lebanon, the 'Gentile' region of Tyre and Sidon. He's been attracting followers, offering fresh perspectives on ancient wisdom and healing the sick, claiming in the process to speak and act for and *as* God. Finally, his disciples are beginning to 'get' it; Peter has just exclaimed 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16.16). Yet immediately, Jesus has begun to subvert their expectations of what this means. 'From that time on', Matthew writes, 'Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised' (Matt. 16.21). Worse, he starts to speak of the necessity of *them* losing *their* lives if they wish to continue following him.

This, then, is the unsettling context in which Peter, James and John, in the company of Jesus, undergo what is sometimes called a 'theophany' – an experience of divine appearing, the invisible God becoming briefly visible within the material world. In the gospel, the Transfiguration functions as a confirmation of Jesus' identity and trustworthiness such that, within 3 chapters, they're all entering Jerusalem on their way to the cross. Which is why, liturgically speaking, we celebrate the Transfiguration on the last Sunday before Lent, which is *our* season of preparation for participating in the movement towards Jesus' self-offering at Easter.

It's often noted that the story of Transfiguration is symbol rich. Jesus going up a high mountain and coming back with his face shining like the sun references

Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34.29ff); the presence and contemporaneity of Moses and Elijah represent the continuing relevance of the Law and the Prophets and Jesus as the fulfilment of both. And so on. But there's a further dimension to this dense layering of meaning I've discovered recently that I find powerful and important. It will take a little explaining, so bear with me as I give you the gist – before suggesting how it might matter for us!

We need to start with the design of the First Temple in ancient Israel – the Temple built by Solomon, destroyed in 587 BCE and replicated in the Second Temple which was known by Jesus and his disciples.¹ This ancient Temple building had an outer court in which the likes of us would congregate. Up ahead of us on a raised platform would have been the altar of sacrifice, and beyond that would have been the Holy Place, containing the Holy of Holies. This was surrounded by a veil, so you couldn't see into it at all. Given this design, says theologian James Alison, it's easy for us to assume that 'the Temple was a place into which ... people went in order to offer sacrifice to God, who dwelt mysteriously and invisibly at the centre of it all'.² That – he says – is a mistake. For, in the theology of ancient Israel, rather than the Temple being designed to enable us (in the outer court) to move up and towards God (who dwelt at the centre), what's actually signified is a movement that goes the other way. The Temple is not, in the first instance, about us moving towards God, but about God moving towards us.

Here's Alison's helpful summary: 'The whole point of the Temple was that it was a microcosm of creation'. Thus, the central, invisible Holy of Holies 'was taken to be the place of God "outside creation", and so outside of time, of space, of matter. This was a "space" that was beyond place, prior to the foundation of the world, forever. And this was where God dwelt' and spoke creation into being.³ So the Veil surrounding the Holy Place was not there to hide God. Rather, symbolically speaking,

¹ James Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*, Book Three: *The Difference Jesus Makes* (Glenview, IL: Doers Publishing, 2013), p.235. In what follows, I draw extensively on Alison's account. See also Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004).

² Alison, *The Difference Jesus Makes*, p.239.

³ Alison, *The Difference Jesus Makes*, p.239.

it was ‘the first sign of creation’.⁴ If the Holy Place is outside time and matter, the rich, multi-coloured fabric of the Veil represented the ‘beginnings of materiality’, the world we live in. In the Temple architecture, continuing towards us on ‘this’ side of the Veil were symbols of the days of creation; for example, a lampstand with 7 lights, symbolizing the separation of light from darkness; a large vessel filled with water, called ‘the sea’, symbolizing the separation of the waters, and so on. All the days of creation were represented, such that (as Alison puts it), what was seen was the movement ‘from outside creation into creation, starting with materiality [at the Veil], and then gradually moving forwards to take in everything that is being brought into being, with us, participants and spectators, at the outer limit of this movement. The movement is towards us’, and includes us.⁵

So that’s the theological design of the space. The major annual feast of this First Temple period was the rite of Atonement. Again, we tend to think of atonement in terms of what we must do or sacrifice to get ourselves into right relationship with God, to move ourselves ‘up’ into heaven. But in the theology of the Temple, once again the movement was the other way around. In the ancient rite of atonement what happened was that that once a year the Lord would emerge from the Holy of Holies, come through the Veil into the created order, so as to offer sacrifice on our behalf. And note, this was not a human sacrifice to placate an angry God; it was God coming into the world so as to restore the harmony of creation, the relationships that had gotten snarled up in the course of the year. Says Alison: ‘what happens at the feast of the Atonement is that the Creator comes into the midst of creation to unensnarl creation from within, to make everything that is flow anew towards giving glory to God’, to ‘unleash its full potential ... and make creation full’.⁶

How, exactly, did that happen, ritually, symbolically? Well, it was complicated and we don’t have time to go into it all here – those of you who are joining Nikolai’s discussion series this Lent will be reading about it! For now, though, what helps is to

⁴ Alison, *The Difference Jesus Makes*, p.240.

⁵ Alison, *The Difference Jesus Makes*, p.241.

⁶ Alison, *The Difference Jesus Makes*, p.243.

know that a key part of the rite of Atonement involved a High Priest whose role it was to represent the Lord God for the day. The priest was dressed in white; he went into the Holy Place (beyond sight of those watching), and then came out again (having so communed in prayer with God that he has become 'one' with God), his white robe brilliant against the rich, multi-coloured fabric of the Temple Veil. Remind you of anything?? As well as his white robe, this High Priest wore on his head a tiara that bore the Hebrew letters representing the unpronounceable, unsayable Name of the Lord. 'Blessed is he, who comes in the Name of the Lord'.

Disturbingly, for us, there was blood involved in this rite. But again it was not the slaughter of an animal representing us, offered to placate the wrath of God. It was rather the slaughter of an animal representing God, whose blood was sprinkled over the assembled crowd by the High Priest, and imagined to restore its life and 'cover' it as a kind of blessing. And meanwhile, another animal (the scapegoat) was symbolically made to carry the sins and fractures of the people out of the city. Margaret Barker, whose exploration of Temple theology forms the basis of this understanding, points out how much of early Christian reflection on Jesus' meaning, how much of our language and liturgy is illuminated when we know this background. What I've said here only skims the surface. But let me highlight two points.

There seems an obvious echo of this rite of Atonement in the gospel's account of the Transfiguration, and it helps interpret what's coming next. Jesus is depicted as the High Priest, though he is not just symbolically but truly one with God. He communes with God in the space beyond creation and comes out into the world (dressed in dazzling white) so as to reconnect creation to its foundation and fullness. At the Transfiguration, the disciples have a vision of God, in the person of Jesus, coming towards us to make us one.

Second, a feature of the Temple rite was that after the High Priest emerged from the Holy of Holies in his white robe, the other priests straight away covered him with a second garment. This was made of exactly the same multi-coloured material as the Temple Veil with one small difference. It was shot through with gold filament,

indicating that the one wearing it has come through from 'the other side'. God, who is in principle invisible, can now be seen. In the Transfiguration story, the disciples seem to want to freeze the frame at the point where Jesus is blazing with divine glory, before he's been covered with the robe of materiality and all the incalitrance and pain that is part of it. But Jesus insists he won't be staying in the space outside creation. Instead, he 'is going to head down the hill and up to Jerusalem', becoming part of the life of the world so as to transform it.⁷

And it seems to me there's something here in this image of a human being clothed in the ordinary fabric of the world, yet with the garment shot through with gold filament that is a profound resource. For me, it offers a way of imagining what matters about our faithfulness to prayer and worship, as well as to the tasks and difficulties of our daily life. How else can the invisible God become visible, the immaterial become material, the unsayable name become sayable, except as it is borne and translated by actions, lives and words that are open to the reality beyond while faithful to the here and now. 'Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see' proclaims the Christmas hymn. This is the meaning of Jesus' incarnation; it's what the disciples realise at the Transfiguration; and now it's our vocation too.

⁷ Alison, *The Difference Jesus Makes*, p.246.