

Transfiguration
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Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 24:12 - 18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16 - 21

Matthew 17:1 - 9

Transfiguration: the glory of God among us in the face of Jesus Christ

Long ago in a patch of bush on a hill near the farm my brother and I found a surveyor's camp. As we explored the site we found a path leading to the top of the hill where swathes had been cut in the bush. Looking down the swathes we saw that each one pointed to a distant hill. What we had discovered was a trigonometry point set up to enable those mapping the country to calculate accurate bearings using the high places as guides.

Transfiguration is a high place, a theological and liturgical trigonometry point in our journey between Epiphany and Easter. It marks the end of the season of Epiphany: the season of light. Looking back from here we recognise the light we anticipated in Advent and celebrated with great joy at Christmas has, in Jesus Christ, shone to greet all nations. Looking forward we see that, like the disciples, we shall leave the mountain and go on a journey, which culminates in reaching another peak: one marked with a cross and the basis for the central feast of the Christian Church, the Great Three Days of Easter.

Transfiguration is so named because this mountain shines with the glory of God: God's unutterable, sovereign presence and power, which transforms the face of Jesus Christ. Here we have confirmation that God's glory dwelt among us in the smallness and tenderness of a child at Christmas, and will be with us at Easter in the one who suffers amongst us and shares our pain. These two aspects of the one story are Good News: God does not remain in remote splendour from us, but enters the realm of human reality. In Jesus Christ God looks on our distorted life and enters into it fully to reconcile, comfort and restore. All of this is because the steadfast, merciful heart of God wills to raise us to new levels of life. As St Augustine said the glory of God is humanity fully alive.

Transfiguration is full of imagery, which teaches us something about the threshold between the mortal and the divine. Glory is the biblical word used to refer to the splendour of God: dazzling light, which by its very nature is overpowering in its presence, and always somewhat out of reach. And yet the readings give us a clear sense that Moses, Peter, James and John experienced the divine presence, and from these stories there are things to notice about this encounter with the transcendent.

In Moses' case, although Joshua went part of the way Moses had to confront the awesome holiness of God alone. There is something being said here about the solitude of the divine human encounter. We can relate it to Jesus in the desert, and Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, struggling to listen for the voice and will of God.

Notice that the encounter between Moses and God was instigated by God and ran according to God's terms. This is reinforced by the fact that on the mountain Moses had to wait. It seems mundane but the point is spiritual and theological. Moses has no agency in this encounter. God came near when God was ready, not because of any demand on Moses' part. We must not underestimate the fact that God's self-giving is not casual or trivial. It is specific: it cannot be presumed upon or taken for granted. It happens at God's behest, not our own.

When the glory of God descended on the mountain it appeared to those below as a devouring fire. But Moses experienced it as a cloud, which protected him from full exposure to the uncreated light of God's presence. We know the chorale from the Messiah, which sings of the Lord coming to the Temple and asks: "Who may abide the day of his coming, who may stand when he appears". We must not readily dismiss or trivialize an encounter so awesome and overpowering, that mortals are unable to stay on their feet. But Moses was protected in this encounter and is still revered in Israel as the one who met with God face to face and lived.

From this we glean another thing about the manifestation of God in the world: revelation and concealment occur simultaneously. The presence of God is with us but it remains inscrutable and is never handed over to be fully in our control. While it becomes possible to know the transcendent God, a dimension of not knowing always remains, which is why it always includes a sense of mystery.

On the seventh day God spoke. This is the centre of this text and it comes after a long and respectful silence. There was no rush to speak on God's part: God's insistent self-giving came after a dignified holy pause. In Deuteronomy Israel remembered: "You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice". (Deut 4:12) Moses met God here, as he did at the burning bush, and from that time his life was not the same.

When Jesus leads Peter James and John up the mountain the scene is replete with the same challenging imagery we find in Exodus. There is a mountain, a cloud, and Moses and Elijah came to speak with Jesus. They signify Jesus' connection with the Law and the Prophets, and the long story of Israel's journey with God through disobedience and deliverance. But whereas in the Old Testament the power, essence and energy of God evades definition and comprehension, Matthew's message is that the light of presence Moses knew has shone in the face of Jesus Christ and embraced him fully as a Beloved Son: one whose words and actions speak completely for the transcendent one who speaks here. To know this is to see that God has shared everything with one of us, whose life becomes a light in our darkness, a point of hope from which we can take our bearings. We are wise if we listen to him.

Matthew's frame for this story makes it even clearer why this is so. He declares the Transfigured Christ is one who will suffer. Jesus is our assurance that in moving towards us in mercy God has not pretended to share our circumstances or seemed to become human. In Jesus Christ God has embraced every aspect of our life, and what has been embraced has been redeemed. This is made clear in the events of Easter in which God calls Life out of darkness.

On the last Sunday before we commence our Journey towards Easter we are lifted up

to see that on the mountain, the one we follow on this path has been invested with an authority that goes beyond Moses and the prophets. His suffering demonstrated a new possibility for life between God and us. In the weeks to come we will rehearse at length the story of this life and death. Today we can join the disciples in coming down the mountain to go with Jesus to Jerusalem. Whatever lies ahead on this road, thanks to Matthew's vision, we can travel with hope for we have been given our bearings in the Beloved son, named for our sake, by the one who transcends all. Thanks be to God. Amen.