

**Transfiguration**  
**2/3/2014**

**Mark the Evangelist**

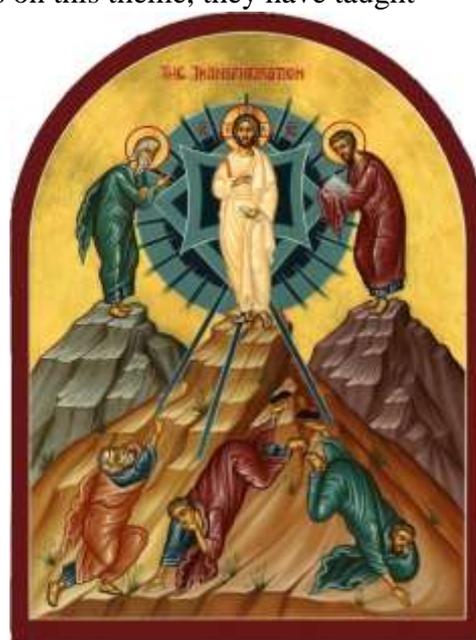
**Exodus 24:12-18**  
**Psalm 2**  
**2 Peter 1:16-21**  
**Matthew 17:1-9**

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Robert Gribben

It has been said that the inventors of our Lectionary placed the story of the Transfiguration at this point of the year as a kind of comfort for us as we travel through Lent. The idea (which is very ancient) is that this prefigures the Resurrection in some ways. I think that's inadequate for two reasons: because more than Easter Day is written into this story; and it's not actually comfortable. Positively, I am delighted to have a theme handed to me which follows Craig's series on the Creed, and (I believe) brings us to a proper response.

I have benefitted from living with Transfiguration icons - real ones, Orthodox ones - over this last week. Having preached a dozen times on this theme, they have taught me something new and refreshing about another of those biblical stories which by familiarity seem tame.

Comfortable it is not. Look at the icon, a modern one, but standing in a long tradition. There in the centre is the transfigured Christ with his two Old Testament companions, but look at the disciples! Rob Gallacher commented to me about his icon, 'All appear to be in free fall, tumbled around by the experience. One has even lost a sandal' [in Rob's version]. On our Order of Service, Peter, on the left, has started up from sleep (so Luke's version) and is shielding his eyes from the sight; in the middle is John, knocked down and looking away, and on the right, James is often depicted as half-getting up, stunned or shocked. These three witnesses are scared out of their wits.



Let me say this as the Orthodox understand it. In the Creation story, God says, 'Let there be light', and there was. But the light which shines at the Transfiguration is not like that which was created to illumine the universe by day and by night. The light which hurled the apostles down the mountain was - as they say - Uncreated Light. It is the Light of the Creator himself, God's original Energy, God's own radiance.

Now 'How good Lord to be here' is a favourite hymn for today, but it's not scary enough. I especially like Brian Wren's hymn (TiS 243):

Christ upon the mountain peak  
stands alone in glory blazing;  
let us, if we dare to speak,  
with the saints and angels praise him - Alleluia!

The tune is unfamiliar, and Craig promises we will learn it, perhaps for August 6th, which is the ancient feast of the Transfiguration for both East and West.

Swift the cloud of glory came,  
God proclaiming in its thunder  
Jesus as his Son by name!  
Nations, cry aloud in wonder - Alleluia!

Peter did want to build huts for the principal actors; perhaps it was for his protection!

Here is another secret in the icon. Look behind the figure of Jesus at the representation of the divine fire and light. The circle is an ancient symbol of the Eternal. Then there is a star of eight points - the number varies; eight is often linked with the resurrection and with baptism. The three down-pointing beams indicate that the source is the Holy Trinity, the Creator, the creative Word and Spirit. And the background of all this the icon is gold: for Matthew says (uniquely) not just that there was a cloud on the mountain, but that it was a 'bright cloud'.

From this cloud, God spoke: to the refugee tribes below Sinai, he gave Ten 'words' (which is what the Commandments are called in Hebrew); and to the apostles, on Sinai and at Jesus' baptism, 'This is my Beloved: hear him' (2 Pet. 1, Mt 3:17). It is important to note that amidst all this holy fear, the word from God is Love.

But look *within* the circle and the star: it is black, a profound darkness. The Bible speaks at every point of God as light, but there is also a darkness; not that God is evil, but that God is Beyond our understanding. The darkness, one might say, is our human darkness; our human inability to understand God at all. There are truths about God which the human mind cannot penetrate. In our clever, self-sufficient culture, we need to be reminded of that.

But everything in today's story leads us to the centre, to Jesus Christ, shining in his body with God's true light, awesome, utterly worshipful, in golden rays before us, the Beyond-in-our-midst. It is in him that we come to the only place where we can look upon God - in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

Over the last few weeks, Craig led us backwards through the creeds. This dull doctrinal dirge is what threw St James backwards, made St John hide his face, and made St Peter make yet another gesture which showed in the one moment, his faith and his foolishness. Our credal journey took us from - by - the Spirit and the Church, through the Good News of Jesus to the love of the Father, and to what follows: glorifying God.

This Wednesday, the season of Lent begins. In his telling of the transfiguration, Mark places it at the point where Jesus turns to take the road to Calvary. The creators of the Lectionary have placed it here too. But think with what a sharp memory Peter, James and John, walked that way with him, and what they learned, when at the Cross they saw the compassionate, all-embracing Love which is God - in his face. The Beloved, in the mountain light, the Beloved with the crown of thorns, shadows forth all that we are, and all with which God meets us, in the humanity of Jesus, our humanity. These bodies of ours, our human existence, have already been touched by God's glory. Lent is about letting our light shine, as is said to us at baptism and its recollection, so that all may see our lives and the Spirit in whom we live them, and give glory to God. And if that light shines where we don't like it, then Lent is about finding the courage to open those dark places up to the healing power of Love.

That is what Charles Wesley's hymn means, praying 'Finish then thy new creation...let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee; changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place' (TiS 217).

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