

2 Peter 1:16-21

Psalm 99

Matthew 17:1-9

The world but not as we know it

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*In a sentence:*

*The Transfiguration of Jesus invites a transforming of our sense for – and living of – the lives we have been given to live*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.*

(Nicene Creed)

This is rather a mouthful, and a contested one. We don't recite the Creed each week but we do often enough; and when we don't say it, it is nevertheless implied in the alternative affirmations of faith, and in other parts of the liturgy.

Where a protest is raised – in the world and often enough in the church – the objection is usually that the confession makes the world too big and God too small. Is God so small as to be identified with Jesus in this way? The objection is not new, which is why the middle bit of this ancient confession of faith is the longest: it's here that God and the world collide. We *have* the Creed because of this apparent smallness of God in Christian confession.

Something of this tension between God and the world is reflected in the account of the Transfiguration we've heard this morning. By itself, the Transfiguration is not easily accessible. What happens here, why Elijah and Moses are there, why it occurs at this point, its fleeting strangeness – all of this compounds the sense of our distance from the reported experience. Are we simply to 'believe' the text and assert that Jesus did glow-up like this for a moment, with heavenly sound effects to complement the light show? What does it all add to our understanding of God? The disciples themselves had no idea what to make of what happened. A hint is given that Easter will make sense of it all, but this doesn't help if we continue to wrestle to make sense of Easter itself.

Most of you have heard dozens of sermons on the Transfiguration, the last 19 of which here at MtE you can find on our website. I'll try not to repeat all that this morning! Today we'll come at it this way: taking as *given* some mystical experience, let's consider the divine voice which offers commentary. The voice declares that Jesus is the Son – God's special one – and that we should take notice of him. What would it mean to say that small and ordinary Jesus is such a presence of the fullness of God?

The first thing we would have to say is that, if Jesus *were* this presence, we wouldn't be able to tell by looking at him at any other time. Peter, James and John get a glimpse of something new, but once they get talking they might wonder whether it wasn't just a dream interrupted by lightning and thunder. Most of the rest of the time, Jesus is just a chap amid a group of men and women, milling about the place, as probably happened

from time to time in those days. Perhaps Jesus is wise, and charismatic, and courageous, and committed to his cause, but that describes anyone with their wits about them. Jesus doesn't *look* special.

We are told that the disciples' response at the time was 'fear' or, as the Greek word could also be translated, 'amazement'. This makes sense in terms of the shock at what happens, as a sudden flash of light makes us blink, or a loud noise makes us jump. Yet we are told the story not to *know* their response but to *share* it. What *if* this were true? If Jesus intersects with God in this way, what then *for us*?

To grasp the extent of this question – the moral extent, we might say, but also what it might mean for our sense of *everything* – we must keep in mind that it is not merely 'a' connection of Jesus to God which flashes forth for a moment. It is the connection of the *crucified* Jesus to God. The crucifixion (as an event) is still just a possible future at this point of the story, but for the Gospel writer and we who think about Transfiguration on *this* side of Easter, Jesus is the crucified, discarded one. Listen, the voice from heaven now commands, to the one you abandoned and crucified. *This* one is my Son, my beloved and my delight. And not so much listen to his 'words' – to this or that saying. Listen rather to the *Word he is* as the collision of the depths of human experience with the whole of God. The Transfiguration is light shining through the cross; (it does not 'look' like the resurrection of Jesus but is the meaning of the resurrection itself).

This, then, is not a warm-and-fuzzy, nearer-my-God-to-thee mountaintop experience. Not merely *Jesus* is transfigured. If it is the crucified Jesus – the sign of the most distant from God parts of the world – if it is *this* one who is transfigured – then even those things in the world which seem far from God are now pulsing with the possibility of bearing God. The world is now not as we have known it. And not only the world but God also is transfigured. God is shown to be willing to 'own', to live into, to die with and to pass through the darkest of human experiences, in the cross.

The Transfiguration, if it happened, says what doctrines of incarnation and atonement and resurrection and consummation would say if they were true: God is the mystery of the world, the hidden beginning, means and end of all that we are. We forget this in the midst of doctor's appointments and overseas trips, between the birth of grandchildren and reports of wars in faraway places. We forget it when we're angry that some justice has not been done, and when we're glad to have received a windfall. We forget, when someone is trying to scam us on the telephone, and when we catch a hint of jasmine on the breeze. To forget God is not to be irreligious but to mistake some part of the world for less than it is – as just a thing which happens. For what it truly is is the possibility of the free and freeing presence of God, making possible the enjoyment – and the suffering – of all that we are and have and can be, without turning those things into God. To say that the big God is met in the small Jesus is to say not merely that this God can be found, but that God *wills* to be found, in all the small (and big) better-and-worse things of our life.

Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made... in order that we might be, too – here and now in our little part of everything.

If we wanted to say why Christians gather like this today, we might say that we gather to be reminded that we have forgotten. We have forgotten that God is the God of small things, even the God of crucified things. We have forgotten, and so we have feared, and we have lashed out, and we have pushed away because we have thought we can't afford to love or forgive or hope. We have forgotten what life and the world can be. The Transfiguration is not a thing which just 'happened'. It is a thing which *can* happen – the discovery of God which transforms the world around us: Here. Now. You. Me. In God.

‘...a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “*This* is my Son, the Beloved and my delight. Listen. Comprehend. Believe. Live.”’

‘When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by amazement.’

What else could they do with such news ringing in their ears? Now everything would have to change...

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