

Matthew 17:1-9

Changed?

ForeWord

A funny thing happened on the way to church this morning! In fact, it happened on Monday when, *thinking about* coming to church this morning, I sat down to have a look at the readings set by our lectionary for today. The “funny” thing was this: hearing a quiet voice speak within: “Oh no, not the Transfiguration. Again”.

Part of this response had to do with the fact that I’ve been doing this for 25 years or so, and there’s a limit to how many imaginative things might be said about the Transfiguration. But there was another dimension to my response. Why do we even bother to give such regular thought to the Transfiguration?

Of course, the story does relate some extraordinary happening, and it is found in documents that are important to the church. To that extent, we need to be able to make something of the Transfiguration. But the very nature of the story is such that our usual treatment of it is what we might call a process of “interpretation”: we seek to interpret the story.

That might seem an obvious thing to have to do when confronted by such a strange story, but it’s worth considering what we are doing when we interpret. Interpretation implies that there is something about the story which is problematic and which we need to sort out. We read that Jesus was transfigured, and we wrestle with the text until it makes sense. What we mean by “making sense” is a kind of *taming* of the text. This is all the more the case when it comes to miracle stories, which this one seems to be. Miracles don’t fit, so we have to make them something else.

But what if the story is not given to us in order to be interpreted? What if the story is itself an interpretation *of us*? That is, what if the story is given as part of a proposition that we are ourselves the problem? If this is the case, then the Transfiguration of Jesus says as much about us as it does about Jesus himself.

Having in mind that expectation of what the text might be doing, let’s now hear once more the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ *Hearing: Matthew 17. 1-9*)

Word: Proclamation

I said a moment ago that the Transfiguration of Jesus is as much about us as it is about Jesus himself. I don’t mean here what is sometimes drawn from the story, that we’re all a bit like the figure of Peter, with his confused stumbling and fumbling in response to Jesus. There is probably some truth in this but there’s another level at which the story is about us.

The central element in the story is not the apparent miracle. It is the voice from heaven. Or more to the point, it’s what the voice *says*, what it points to. The miraculous transformation of Jesus would be ambiguous – even meaningless – without some accompanying text, but what the voice says doesn’t need the shiny miracle; it doesn’t even need to be loud. And what the word says, illustrated by the miracle, is that

everything which matters is just *here*, in this ordinary Jesus. This is the surprise, the shock, the miracle of the story.

We have here not an account of some amazing event alongside all the other miracles Jesus is said to have done. The story doesn't even declare that Jesus is somehow bigger or better than us in the way we normally understand that comparison. The story simply declares the presence of God in the very ordinary Jesus: "This is my son". We tend to imagine voices from heaven to be booming and overwhelming, just as Jesus is said to have suddenly exploded in light, but the miracle is not the dazzling brilliance or the booming voice from heaven. The miracle is what the voice declares: this one, this ordinary human in his fleshy createdness, this one embodies everything. Here, in this ordinary one, is the truth. Here, hanging on the cross, is the truth. Here is divine pleasure, divine expression: in the human Jesus.

We are not to see Jesus transfigured; we are to see *through* it. The Transfiguration marks Jesus as the coincidence of earth and heaven, the heavenly kingdom come and done, as earth. The point of the story, then, is not that the transfigured Jesus is strangely out of place. The point is that Jesus fits precisely here. And the follow-on from this is that it's the surprised Peter and the other disciples who do not fit. Though Peter wants to build a place to put Jesus into, Jesus is already fit for location; it is Peter who is wrongly in the world.

And now, with Peter, we see that the story is about us as much as about Jesus. The text interprets us: you are surprised at Jesus, surprised at the proposal that in his ordinariness is the coincidence of God and all things. The glory of God, one of the old sages said, is the human being fully alive. If Jesus is lit up with divine glory, it is because his humanity itself is deep, pure, and glorious.

This might change our idea of salvation. The common notion of salvation is very much one of being saved from something – perhaps a salvation from sin and judgment, and likely consignment to hell. We are saved, that is to say, *from* the world and its ways, and are now oriented toward another world yet to come. On this reading, Jesus comes, or is sent, in order to *die*, in order to make an exchange to secure this other place for us and finally carry us over into it.

But an alternative reading of the life and death of Jesus is that he comes not in order to die but in order to live. Or, we might say, he comes to relocate heaven for us in the here and now. On this reading, the Transfiguration is not a foretaste of the coming resurrection after Jesus dies; it is a declaration to Peter and the other disciples that here and now, in the tangible and fleshy reality of Jesus, is the presence and reality of God. Or to put it rather more pointedly: here, now, in this one, is heaven: This is my son, the beloved. See him. Listen to him. Be as he is.

Our problem is not that we don't see flashy displays of God's presence in the world around us. Our problem is that we think that that's what we need to see for God to be present to us. Blessed are those who have not seen, but heard and understood. We might even dare to wonder whether Jesus really was transfigured or whether, for a moment, Peter and the others understand what they are dealing with. It doesn't really matter. The gospel would still be the gospel without the Transfiguration story.

And so the question is, what is the gospel? And, alongside this, if the gospel is "good news", what is the bad news the gospel answers?

The gospel reveals the possibility of a life free from fear, a life which doesn't turn the world into either a Godless place, or make it into God. The bad news here is that we do fear what we should not, that we do banish God, or worship the world.

The gospel is that God – and so our fullest, richest humanity – is neither a long way off nor an occasional, local, miraculous flash. Reconciliation with God comes with reconciliation with the requirement that life not be put off to some after-death renewal but be lived to its fullest here and now.

If we must come around to the Transfiguration every year, it's not for comprehensiveness' sake – that we cover all the high points in the story on a regular basis. It is because the gospel is about us ourselves being changed. Not transfigured – not made to look different, but changed as we are, in our awareness of what and where we are, of who and whose we are, even now.

The glory of God is a human being fully alive. Jesus was always this, even *despite* the Transfiguration. The gospel is that we might be it, too.

Let us, then, see and listen to what and how Jesus is, that our lives here and now might be lived from glory into greater glory.

And all God's people say, Amen.
