

2nd Sunday of Lent Year A

Matthew 17.1-9

...a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. Matthew 17.5-6

In one of its few differences from the patterns followed by the Church of England's Common Worship, the lectionary of the Western church insists that each year we read the story of the Transfiguration on the second Sunday of Lent. There is nothing odd about this choice. In each of the synoptic gospels, these events serve to remind us as much of what awaits Jesus at the end of the story, as they do of his glory manifested here and now. It is almost as if the evangelists – Matthew in our case this morning, but Mark and Luke as well – are narrating something they cannot avoid, but are going out of the way to prevent us getting the wrong idea. The Transfiguration is not, first and foremost, some sort of momentary glimpse into the true identity of Jesus, as if the mask of his humanity has slipped and we now see the reality of his divine sonship. No, what is being revealed in this transfiguration, this metamorphosis, is not so much who Jesus really is, as who you and I really are, or rather

who you and I can and will ultimately be. And this is all because the story of the Transfiguration ends not on the mountain with the descent of that cloud, but on another hill, and with another darkness, at the end of the season we call Lent.

When we consider the problems of Christology, that is, how best to talk about Christ, we must be very wary of assuming that Jesus' humanity is some sort of disguise, and underneath we will discover the real Jesus. This is quite wrong. Jesus' humanity is not a disguise, he is truly human and truly divine. And we should also remember in this context that Jesus is not the only Biblical person to be transfigured. The choice of Moses and Elijah as conversation partners is indeed symbolic of the law and the prophets, but it also reminds us that Moses, when he came down from the mountain, reflected the glory of the Lord in such a way that his face shone so brightly that a veil was required for mere mortals to look on him. That veil was only removed when he spoke with the Lord face to face, a transition from partial to complete revelation which Paul is not slow to pick up on when contrasting the old law with the new dispensation.

Matthew's account deliberately gives us the slightly odd detail of the cloud which is described as bright. How can a cloud be bright, surely a cloud brings shadow and darkness? The evangelist here has in mind what is sometimes called the Shekinah, the dwelling of the divine presence, on the holy mountain, or tabernacled among his people in the temple of Jerusalem. In particular, in the account of Moses on Sinai in the book of Exodus, we read of the glory of the Lord descending and remaining for six days. We are told that a cloud covered the mountain, but that the appearance of divine glory was like a devouring fire. Moses enters the cloud and speaks with God face to face. Here in the vision of the Transfiguration, he does the same, as the newer and greater Moses is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

This vision, this glory, is not for the fainthearted. The disciples are overwhelmed by what they see and hear. It's easy to scoff at poor old Peter's dim response about making tents for the three of them, but his dullness is not simply a matter of wanting to contain the presence of the Godhead within a fabricated shelter. That misunderstanding is at work, but so is the greater contrast between what they think is the vision they are seeing, and the reality to which it directs them.

As we read the gospels we are constantly reminded that the greatest of stumbling blocks which the disciples encounter is the suffering and death of Jesus. It can be no accident that, when Jesus has come down from the mountain, Matthew has him instruct the disciples not to tell anyone what they have seen until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. In other words, the Transfiguration is not some isolated magical vision of Jesus' true identity, but rather, Jesus' true identity cannot be separated from his suffering and death. It is just such a separation, an earthly triumph and glorious victory, which too many people who surround him are seeking. Already Peter has gone almost immediately from confessing Jesus as the Christ to contradicting his statement that suffering and death await him in Jerusalem. When that passion unfolds in a series of bewildering events, the response of the disciples will be betrayal, sloth, flight, and denial.

Their bewilderment now will be their bewilderment then. Notice the way in which the disciples respond to the cloud and the voice by prostrating themselves, filled with awe. The text makes a point of saying they fell on their faces. The contrast is marked: while Jesus' face is shining with the glory of the creator, his disciples have their faces pressed to the ground unwilling and unable to see. In exactly the same way, their abandonment of Jesus in the moment of his passion leaves

them unable to see the fullness of his glory, as he spends his last breath for love of the world in the agony of the crucifixion. Only after the resurrection will they be able to make sense of what they have witnessed. Until then the same veil remains over their minds as Moses had to wear in order to protect those who could not enjoy the intimate communication which the Lord had granted to him. It is in death, and in new life, we might say, that Jesus is truly transfigured, and by being united to that death and resurrection in the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, we are enabled to share in that transfiguration of all humanity.

The disciples will learn and understand all this only at the end of the story. It is our transformation, already accomplished in Christ, which we have yet to understand as we try to make sense of the presence of God in our lives. How much do we see, how much do we hear, in any one particular moment? Are our Christian journeys not just that, journeys in which new experience and awareness and understanding is constantly being given to us? In the ups and downs of day to day living, in those moments when God's presence feels close, in those all too frequent times when love and compassion seem so very far away. The full truth has yet to be revealed, in this season of Lent, in the whole of our lives.

So if there is a concealment in this story of metamorphosis, it's a concealment of that which we are not yet able to bear, the reality of death in the life of God himself. The season of Lent is that process of learning, of gradually accustoming our eyes, to the baffling truth which awaits us in Holy Week and Easter, that God is transfigured in death so that we are transfigured by life, and that to be transfigured is what it means to be children of God.