

Lent 2 2023

Matthew 17 – transfiguration

Transfiguration is one of those words which we are used to hearing only in one particular context – this one, the context of scripture and the worship of the church. It's not a word we are likely to apply to the everyday. There's nothing essentially odd about it, indeed our word transfiguration just translates a Greek word with which we are already familiar, the word "metamorphosis". But we don't tend to think of the transfiguration of Jesus in the same way as we consider the stories of Zeus becoming a bull or a swan, or the devil taking the form of a snake or a button seller, or whatever it is. Jesus' being transfigured doesn't turn him into something else, he remains very much the divine Son whom the gospels wish to portray.

But as we read the story of Jesus' transfiguration, there's a danger that we think of it only in visual terms, and specifically that we treat this particular metamorphosis as the dropping of a costume or disguise. This is, of course, the opposite of the supernatural metamorphoses to which we are accustomed – the seducer, the thief, the devil, whoever it is, uses a concealed form to get what they want. Here in the gospels, the

transfiguration might be thought of as removing the cloak of deceit and showing us who Jesus really is, as if the humanity of Jesus is something which needs to be seen through or overlooked in order for his divine identity to be known. Such a reading is deeply unhelpful, suggesting as it does that Jesus is not a human being as you and I are. On the contrary, we should remember that what is transfigured is precisely the human being himself, the bodily creature who is Jesus of Nazareth. Transfiguration is an extraordinary bodily event, but it is a bodily event nonetheless.

It is good, therefore, to be hearing the story of the Transfiguration as we continue to live the church's penitential season which we call Lent. No doubt many of us are engaging in disciplines of prayer which take some physical form – perhaps we have given up some particular foods or some form of drink, or perhaps we are engaging in general fasting, from nourishment or from forms of entertainment or even social media. As we undertake our Lenten disciplines, we remain prey to the temptation which says that true Christian life, spiritual life, is something which ought to leave the body behind, move away from the physical to an immaterial self which is our true identity. But this is a temptation to falsehood – Christianity has never taught that the bodily or the physical are inconveniences or negatives to be avoided. Quite the opposite. The

central Christian doctrine of the incarnation provides the most robust affirmation of bodily existence in any religious tradition: if God himself possesses a human body, then surely nothing can be more sacred.

But to affirm the body's goodness is not to deny its ultimate mystery. Human beings are mysterious creatures because creation itself is mysterious – the divine risk of love poured out bringing something where there was nothing. The goal of human existence is nothing other than union with that divine love, and the vehicle for that union is the human body: the human body of Christ, and the human bodies of each of us. When we see Jesus transfigured on the mountain we are not being given a glimpse into what divinity looks like without its human expression. Rather, we are being taught by God that the fullest glory of humanity is humanity transfigured, taken and transformed by the divine life which unites with it in the mystery of the incarnation. Bodily life is what we are, and transformed bodily life is what we will be.

That this is a fact of everyday Christian life is shown to us in the sacraments of the church, the physical bodily media through which God chooses to enact his love in our lives. The principal sacramental act which is the celebration of the eucharist is at once a celebration of the

physical and the spiritual in the divine presence of our Lord and saviour. When we affirm our belief in the reality of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, we are not reducing the divine presence to the purely physical, the everyday bodily existence which is the life we now enjoy. This is not a reduction, but an increase, because we are being drawn up into that ultimate bodily existence, the mysterious unity of human and divine in which the incarnate Son represents – re presents – the very meaning of human bodily existence in the life of God himself.

It is quite wrong to think of the miracle of the eucharist as if it were something which contracts divinity into physical elements, as if God – in the form of bread and wine – is somehow under our control. The mysterious bodily life of Christ's glorified humanity is something which infinitely transcends our attempts at particularizing or compartmentalizing God. The presence of the divine cannot be treated as if it were something restricted to a particular place or composition of atoms, any more than the vision on the holy mountain can be contained by Peter's desire to build tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. To say that Christ is present in the eucharist is to say that we are present in and at the banquet of heaven, that the humanity which lives within the life of God is ours to share, to live and be nourished by.

It is true that the eucharist is symbolic in character, but it is far from being merely symbolic. The signs which God employs in our sacramental life do not simply point, they draw us, they pull us into a new form of bodily existence which in this life remains beyond our understanding. But, like the transfiguration of Jesus, they show us what divinised humanity will look like when God's purpose is achieved.

Of course, in the life of Jesus, that purpose is achieved not in the transfiguration but in what it truly prefigures: the cross and resurrection of the Son of God. This is why the church reads the gospel of the transfiguration now, in the season of preparation for the dying and rising of Christ. Jesus' transformation of bodily appearance is not an escape from the physicality of God's creation, indeed it is quite the opposite. Because it is the body which is transfigured, it is the body which must and will be made anew by the insanity of divine love, the call to self-giving and suffering and death which the one who was transfigured must embrace on behalf of those who sleep through the ultimate manifestation of God's glory.

The bodily self-denial which Christians practise in Lent is not, then, just a matter of endurance, of lasting long enough to make it to Easter. It's a matter of paying attention to our bodies because paying attention to our bodies is necessary if we wish to pay attention to ourselves – those selves are not something different from, or added to, our bodies. Our bodies are who we are. What God has in store for us is the transformation of our bodily lives through the death and resurrection of Christ and the new life of Easter which we celebrate every time we come to this altar. That transformation is enacted as we feast on the presence of the one whose life transfigures our own.