

Transfiguration of the Lord 2021

Blessing of Icon in memory of Fr Jay Wilson

It is ten years since we lost Fr Jay Wilson, a faithful priest of this church who served at our altars for many years, and for a long time celebrated mass for us every Sunday evening. Jay was a remarkable person, and one felt that the better one got to know him, the more there was to discover about him. As well as being a priest and a professor in the states, in England, and on the sub-continent, he was a poet, a scholar and a translator; he was a singer and composer, writing beautiful settings of some of his favourite authors, and songs of his own; he was a theologian and a philosopher who engaged particularly with psychology and psychoanalysis; and he was a well-known and well-loved figure in Oxford who counted among his friends some of our city's most committed atheists.

I got to know Jay principally because of his generosity and hospitality. Not only was he always ready to assist in church, he liked nothing better than welcoming

people to his home or to a favourite watering hole, to talk and to listen. The more I was able to partake of his hospitality, the more I learned from him and about him. The gradual unfolding of his remarkable life story took place because of that principle of welcome and fascination which was his approach to the world, to its ideas and to its people.

It could not be more appropriate, then, that the icon we rededicate today, given generously in Jay's memory, is a strikingly beautiful account of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity. The picture, representing the three visitors who come to meet Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, is an artistic prayer in which hospitality and revelation are held together in an extraordinary vision. As the painting draws us in to the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, so we receive the divine gift of revelation whereby God's gracious hospitality teaches and instructs us that the reality of the divine is love given and received, love in the welcoming relationship which we call the Trinity.

The vision of the Transfiguration which we celebrate today is closely related to this divine hospitality. The scene witnessed by the three disciples, in which Jesus' appearance becomes a dazzling white and he is seen speaking with Moses and Elijah, is often misconceived as a sort of mask slipping moment, as if the disguise of Jesus' humanity has momentarily fallen away, and we are able to see what is the real truth underneath. But Jesus' humanity is not a disguise, he is truly human and truly divine. And 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.

The gospel writers remind us that the witnesses were utterly bewildered by what they saw. As we heard in this morning's version from Mark, they are instructed by Jesus to remain silent. Only after the resurrection will they be able to make sense of what they have witnessed. Small wonder. 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. The revelation of the divine with which God is blessing his people, is the gradual revelation of truth which will not be fully accomplished until the passion, death and resurrection of Christ have brought to fulfilment the ministry of the incarnation.

As is true of our icon, this revelation depends on the divine hospitality, upon God identifying himself with us to as to welcome us into the divine life. It is humanity which is transfigured by the divine presence, so that the gradual process of revealing to us

the truth about God is also the gradual process of revealing to us the truth about ourselves. The story of the transfiguration is not, then, so much a story which reveals the true identity of Jesus, as a story which reveals the true identity of redeemed humanity, of you and of me, of the transformed creation which is the result of God's transformed identity, of his taking on the identity of humanity in order that all humans might be transformed in him. The vision of Jesus on the holy mountain is the anticipation of the divinization of humanity which God is bringing about in each of us.

What does this mean? It means that, as members of the body of Christ, we can rejoice that the fate of the first fruits is the fate of us all. If transfiguration is really, as well as symbolically, the transformation of humanity by the presence of the glory of God, then your humanity and mine has been, and will be transfigured. Symbolically transfigured in baptism, by our being united with the death and resurrection of Jesus, our joining with those bewildering mysteries

which were able to make sense of that blinding vision; but also literally transfigured, if by that we mean that our humanity is changed forever by the presence of Christ.

And that transformation, that transfiguration, is inextricably linked with the death and resurrection of Christ. This story reminds us that the process of learning, of discipleship, is never complete in this life. We are always called to grow into God, even as he draws us into his own life by taking our humanity upon himself. There is, perhaps a concealment at work in the story of the transfiguration, but it is not the concealment of Jesus' true identity so much as the concealment of its consequences. That which, for the disciples, remains to be revealed is that which they themselves will initially reject – the necessity of Jesus' suffering and. They will deny, they will betray, they will flee in fear. But what will be unfolded is that which so bewilders, the necessary self-offering of the life of God himself, the self-offering which is made precisely because of our inability to understand its

need, to perceive our true identity as children of God, and hence to offer ourselves perfectly in love. The one who is transfigured is also the one who transfigures, who alters our very person by uniting his life to ours, by welcoming us into the hospitality of the Godhead, by drowning our old self in the ocean of divine love. Love really does change everything.