

Gerald Bray looks at the importance of some key Scriptural passages for Christian doctrine.

# The Transfiguration

**Matthew 17: 1-9; Mark 9: 2-10; Luke 9: 28-36**

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One of the most famous but least understood stories of the life of Jesus is the account of his transfiguration “on a high mountain”, traditionally thought to have been Mt. Tabor, shortly before his passion. The story has frequently been at the centre of mystical experiences of various kinds, and it was a major element in the spiritual exaltation of the Taborites in fifteenth-century Bohemia. They took the teaching of Jan Hus and combined it with an extreme form of millenarianism which was eventually crushed by the authorities. Nearer home, the Transfiguration appears as a minor feast in the calendar of the Book of Common Prayer, and it is only in the Alternative Service Book (1980) that it has regained its earlier prestige.

The chequered history of the Transfiguration, especially its association with mysticism, has had the effect of pushing the incident into the background of Church life. Who would preach on it, or venture to explain its deeper

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implications? The difficulty which it can cause in this respect is amply demonstrated by the belief, held by many German scholars, that it is really a post-resurrection narrative which was displaced in the early tradition! A careful reading of the text will show the implausibility of this thesis and it has never received universal assent, but the fact that it has been seriously suggested indicates just how difficult it is to know what to make of it!

This is a great pity, because the account of the Transfiguration is one of the most important sources for Christology. It offers a glimpse into the self-understanding of Jesus which reveals the hidden depths of his being and explains the purpose of his coming in a way which is unique in the Gospels. If we fail to understand it we are in danger of failing to understand Christ.

The first point to be made is that the Transfiguration is a *revelation* of God in Jesus Christ. Here we must pay the closest attention to the word used to describe the event. In Greek it is *metamorphosis*, meaning a change of *morphe*, or form. In Greek thought, the form is the appearance or shape of an object. Together with substance, it is a constituent part of every being. The relationship between these two was (and to some extent still is) hotly debated. Most people believed that it was possible to change the form of a thing without changing its substance. In other words, bread could be in the form of loaves or of rolls yet still be considered the same substance. Some, however, have maintained that form and substance are inextricably linked. Change one and you will change the other. This view has been held in our own day by Marshall McLuhan, whose famous dictum “the medium is the message” sums it up nicely. Finally, Roman Catholics have maintained that it is possible to alter the substance without changing the form. Thus a wafer can become the body of Christ without losing the form of bread. Unfortunately these philosophical distinctions have been lost in popular speech, so that *transformation* now tends to mean a change of substance as well as form. A butterfly is more than a transformed caterpillar, but it would seem inappropriate to say that it had been transubstantiated!

The distinction is an important one however, and has been carefully guarded by using the word *transfiguration*. Jesus underwent a change of form designed to reveal the underlying substance — his divinity. Even more important, the change did not involve the destruction of his human shape, as if it were a mask concealing an incomprehensible divinity. The Transfiguration confirmed the validity of Jesus’ humanity as the vehicle for expressing his divine presence in the world.

This is a matter of supreme importance in an age in which it is widely believed that God and man are “wholly other” — incompatible by nature and therefore incapable of entering into relationship. Humanity has a place within the divine revelation, and on the mount Jesus revealed to his disciples what the resurrection life of the body would be like.

At the same time however, he revealed that the incarnation was not an end in itself. It has always been a temptation to interpret the image of the Church as the body of Christ in terms which make it an extension of the Incarnation. This is particularly true of Roman Catholicism, which goes so far as to call Mary the mother of the Church. But it can also be found in Evangelical

circles, especially among those who regard social concern and political involvement as part of the Gospel. Caring for "the whole man" is justified theologically by referring to the Incarnation as the model for Christian living. This has now gone so far that even physical healing is assumed by many to be an integral part of salvation.

The transfiguration serves as a corrective to these ideas by putting them in their proper context. The redemption of humanity is not ruled out — on the contrary! But it is put within the proper framework. In this world the Church receives no more than a glimpse of the glory to be revealed in us at the end of time. Jesus was not transfigured in order to fulfil his mission then and there, but in order to give the disciples a picture of the life to

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come. Like them, we catch only glimpses of the resurrection glory, which are a foretaste of our inheritance in heaven. Peter understood this in later life, and wrote as much to the early church (II Peter 1:16-18).

Another important aspect of the Transfiguration is that it sets Jesus within the context of Old Testament Judaism. When Peter saw Moses and Elijah with Jesus, he suggested that three tabernacles be built to honour each of the men. The implications of this are clear enough. Jesus was to be given a certain priority, by being placed first, possibly out of deference, but essentially he would be the equal of the great prophets of Israel. In reality though, the appearance of the two patriarchs demonstrates not Jesus' equality but his superiority over them.

First, it is to be noted that Jesus appeared alone to begin with. His clothing is described as dazzling white, which represents the pure light of God. Moses and Elijah appear subsequently, and they are visible only in the light of Jesus and in relation to him. Jesus can converse with them as well as with the disciples, but the disciples speak only to Jesus, who is thus portrayed as the link between the living and the departed. The significance of Moses and Elijah lies in the fact that they represent the Law and the Prophets, the two strands of Old Testament teaching to which Jesus appealed as witnesses of his coming. Both bear witness to him and both are *glorified*, i.e. revealed in their spiritual nature, only in the light of Christ.

The Transfiguration is therefore of the greatest importance for what it teaches about the fulfilment of the Old Testament in Christ. We are reminded in fact of Moses' transfiguration at Sinai, when he had to veil himself in

front of the people. Paul used that incident as descriptive of the blindness of the Jews, and it is entirely possible that the Transfiguration is also harking back to Sinai and the inability of Israel to tolerate the full ray of divine light, even as it was reflected in the face of Moses. The disciples, however, had been exposed to the full brightness, and had not been blinded by it.

The experience of the mountaintop is also of great importance for what it teaches about *the spiritual life* of Christ's followers. Notice that the disciples were sleepy, a detail which is reminiscent of Gethsemane. For some reason it seems that the most intense moments in the earthly life of Jesus are accompanied by a drowsiness in the disciples. Just when they should have been alive with excitement, they are portrayed as distracted and uninterested. Why?

The answer, it would appear, is that this corresponds to a peculiar experience of all believers. Whether we are mystics speaking of accidie, that listlessness which comes at moments of intense spiritual life, or whether we are sober-minded no-nonsense Evangelicals talking about dryness and a certain tiredness of the soul, the effect is the same. We find that in our walk with God the weakness of the flesh intervenes to prevent us from watching and waiting on the Lord in the way we know we should. Many good Christians suffer untold agonies because they feel unable to confess to such an "unspiritual" failure, and great discouragement can result. But this experience is common to the saints, and is shown in Scripture to be the prelude to great things in the presence of God.

This does not mean that the Bible approves of such lassitude, or encourages it in us as a means of spiritual

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growth. If mechanical exercises cannot bring us nearer to God, how can we expect deliberate indifference to do so? The point is not that laziness is a virtue, but that the flesh is weak and not to be trusted. What spiritual pride might have resulted if the disciples had been able to think that the transfiguration was the reward for their watchfulness!

The thorniest question connected with the disciples is not this, however, but the problem of *mystical* experience. At various times in the history of the Church men have claimed that they too have been transfigured in the uncreated light of Mt. Tabor. In some contemplative traditions of monasticism it has become the cherished goal to which the Christian should aim by means of spiritual exercises and ascetic discipline. Is there anything in the text which could encourage such behaviour?

When considering the mystical flavour of the Transfiguration, it is important to remember the difference between Moses and Elijah on the one hand, and the disciples on the other. Both stand in relationship to Jesus, but the former represent the Church triumphant whilst the latter are as yet "the Church militant here in earth." This distinction is not a trivial one, but is of the utmost importance. The disciples witnessed the transfiguration of others in an event which was really the revelation of heavenly glory. They did not participate in this transfiguration themselves, and did not experience the glory which was to be revealed in them. This revelation of glory in us, which the whole creation awaits with eager anticipation, is not a flesh of lightning irrupting into the world as an ecstatic experience, but a permanent reality which will be established at the end of time (Romans 8:18-19).

Having said this, it remains true that the disciples did enter into the mystery of the Transfiguration in a way which went beyond rational explanation. We must never let a false interpretation of spiritual experience influence us to the point where we discount such things altogether. Luke 9:34 tells us plainly that a cloud came and enveloped the disciples when they were gazing at the three men transfigured. The cloud is the symbol of the presence of God in many parts of the Scripture, but also of the distance which remains between us and the heavenly glory. In terms of visual understanding it is truly the Cloud of Unknowing, the reminder that we walk by faith, not by sight.

At the same time however, the unknowing is not ignorance or separation from God. On the contrary, it is in the cloud that God speaks to the disciples and bears

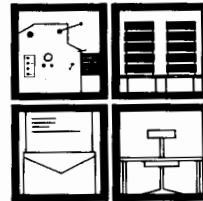
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witness to his son Jesus. The vision itself did not tell them this, since Peter imagined Jesus to be more or less on a par with Moses and Elijah. A clear explanation of who Jesus was came only when the vision itself was obscured.

This point is of great importance because it testifies to the nature of Christian experience. Many people feel that there would be some advantage in seeing Jesus face to face, that "seeing is believing". Yet whilst the Bible does not discount the value of the disciples' experience, it quite clearly puts the emphasis on their encounter with God by means of *hearing is voice*. The priority of hearing over seeing is a constant factor in the whole of the Biblical revelation. It is no accident that Peter, when referring to this incident, does so in the context of exalting the Scriptures as the recorded speech of God. The Church militant sees through a glass darkly and not face to face (I Cor. 13:12) but it has the words of God to bear witness to the glory which will be revealed.

Lastly we must consider briefly the temptation which Peter had to record the experience in monuments of brick and mortar. Christians are always inclined to hark back to the great moments of the past, especially the experience of conversion, and set these up in their minds as the norm for the Christian life. Jesus does not attack this desire but neither does he respond to it directly. For him, spiritual experience is a signpost on the journey, an encouragement to go on to greater things. The Christian life must never get stuck in the past, but must press on to further heights. The disciples were told not to broadcast what had happened, but to wait until after the resurrection.

There may have been many motives for this command of Jesus, but it is interesting to note what is recorded in Scripture. According to Mark 9:10 they kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant. In other words, at the very moment of greatest exaltation, when the temptation to spiritual pride must have been strongest, Jesus challenges them with a whole new idea. Here was something they had not yet seen, a further step which they would have to take before they could speak about what had just happened. The Transfiguration was not an end in itself but a stage on the journey into Christ, the Son of Man and the Son of God. We as Christians must grasp the teaching contained in this great event and apply to it ourselves so that when he comes again we too may enter into his Transfiguration glory and bear witness with Moses, Elijah and all the company of heaven that Jesus Christ is indeed King of Kings and Lord of Lords to the glory of God the Father.



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