

Transfiguration

a sermon given by the Revd Canon Dr Andrew Wingate OBE
at St Margaret's, Rosyth and Holy Trinity, Dunfermline, on Sunday 7 August 2016
The readings were Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14; 2 Peter 1.16–19; Luke 9:28–36

This feast day has been celebrated since the 4th or 5th century, and has a central place in the church year in the Eastern Orthodox churches. Icons of the Transfiguration are found universally, and fit with the mystical dimension of those churches. In the western churches, paintings are rarer, though the most famous is much reproduced, that by Raphael, painted in 1518–20 (opposite).

It is special in the way it shows Christ on the mountain, with Elijah and Moses next to him, and below the encounter between the disciples and the father of a demon-possessed boy, as in our gospel today. The painting confronts us with two realities – that of Christ in glory – and the other that of the reality of human pain, suffering, conflict and struggle. It is an extraordinary depiction of the text – and of two sides of Christian life – the high times, the times of uplift in the Spirit, the encounters with the living Lord – and then the day-to-day realities of Christian discipleship, when it seems we can do little more than hold on in faith, when struggles seem overwhelming. Maybe some of you are in one place at the moment, some in another.

The biblical story itself has amazing power and, as has been pointed out often, it seems almost like one of the resurrection appearances out of place – we can compare it with the Easter story of the meeting with Mary in the garden; the appearances to the disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem; and the Emmaus revelation to a couple of disciples, through the breaking of the bread. And the stories of struggle and darkness permeate all the gospels, and the struggle to cast out illness, social exclusion, and demon possession, and death.



The power of the Transfiguration story speaks in many ways, many comparisons, many encounters, personal and historical and religious. We can experience such moments in nature, if we open our eyes. We have just spent two weeks in the Outer Hebrides. The clouds come and go, as does the wind and rain storms. But then there are the amazing, awe-inspiring moments when the sun comes out and the white beaches sparkle and radiate remarkable light and colour. All around, we see mobile phones come out, and multiple photos being taken – including mine! There is a desperate urgency to capture the moment, before it goes again – something to hold to, as we come back to look, again, as we

look at our laptops later, in the darkness of winter in our urban settings. My wife Angela and I were recalling last week the moments when, awe struck by the beauty of its calling, we heard a solitary golden plover, singing at the top of a hill, when on a walk on the same Western Isles, some 15 years ago, something we have not heard again, and very special, we just stopped and listened.

I came across recently a poem of Ann Lewin, "Transfiguration".

A moment of blinding perception –
it would be good to stay there –
but clutch it, and it's gone.

They come unheralded,
those moments of dazzling clarity,
and leave us as suddenly.

As well try catch the kingfisher
darting through stillness.

Be thankful for its jewelled beauty,
and keep awake, keep alert.

'Unheralded' – these moments cannot be forced – I searched last week to see a golden eagle. I waited in an eagle-sighting hide on Harris, and nothing came, though I had walked a long way and it was drizzling.

These are transfiguring moments in the natural world. We can think too of the moments in history which we will never forget. The sight on our TV screens of the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, with no violence but just the power of people's longing for liberation. The sight of Nelson Mandela walking free from imprisonment, acknowledging the cheers of the crowds in his own modest way, as he walked down a main highway in Capetown, free at last, after nearly 30 years. I remember coming from church on a Sunday morning in 1994, and seeing this on our screens. The historical pictures we can see of the end of the war in 1945, and the ecstatic jubilation of the crowds in London. All these of course then followed by the years

of struggle that have followed in each of these situations. More recently, we can think of the moment when the photo was released of the small boy lying dead on a beach in Turkey – such a powerful image that appeared to change hearts and minds across the western world, not least here – with promises to receive such children in large numbers, but to which there has been so little followup – the struggles go on day by day, for example, to receive unaccompanied children from Calais, just 20 so far of the hundreds promised by the so-called Dubs amendment in the House of Lords. And the death of Jo Cox, horrific, but in some ways inspiring in what followed in terms of the little-known gem that she was and her family – the call for a gentler politics, and her mantra to love, not just our neighbour, but the neighbour of our neighbour – but how little has followed of the gentler politics that mourners pledged to follow in the days that followed. And if I dare venture into an even more recent event, the Brexit event, and the cry that this be seen as a new day of liberation by certain politicians, and the excitement of crowds of supporters that night – but then the seeming dark prospects which have followed, and years of struggle expected.

And then the moment of personal encounter – suddenly seeing others differently, or our lives differently – the being "Surprised by Joy", as C S Lewis puts it, in his great book about personal conversion. Such moments need times afterwards to reflect, which may be about struggle to integrate. T S Eliot – "to have had the experience, but missed the meaning" is so often the case. We have to work on such experiences, and it may take a very long time. It surely did with Peter, James and John, as they reflected on what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration. This journey is reflected in our Epistle today from 2 Peter – years later, Peter reflects here on how, with their own eyes they saw the greatness of Christ, his honour

and glory; how they heard the voice of God, “this is my own Son with Whom I am well pleased”, and how they felt this light shining in darkness, as they went on their way of struggle.

There is so much I can add, so many transformations through ‘Encounters in the Spirit’, as I called a WCC book I wrote, about my meetings with Muslims – and I could add, with Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists – such has been my special opportunities in ministry. But I will end with part of a passage from Teilhard de Chardin, the Roman Catholic divine:

“Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are, quite naturally, impatient, in everything, to reach the end without delay. We would like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability – and that it may take a very long time.”

(from *Hearts on Fire*)

And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually – let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don’t try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.’

So we are all a journey of Christian discipleship. There will be a mixture of times of transfiguration, and probably much longer periods of struggle. And Jesus will be with us in both, and we are to support each other in both times.