

Transfiguration

In our Gospel reading there are Two transfiguration stories.
Two accounts of Jesus that may not fit our frame of reference.
Two failures to grasp the situation by the disciples.
Two stories that lend themselves to the experience of following Jesus Christ.

In my last sermon I quoted a verse of a song we sing.

*From heaven you came helpless babe
Entered our world your glory veiled.*

On the mountaintop, Jesus' veiled glory is unveiled, just for a little while.

What we are doing when we read and preach the bible is hermeneutics – it's the theory and the practice of interpretation and being able to justify our conclusions as much as we are able.

Some bible interpreters have found the transfiguration such a strange event that it simply doesn't fit their frame of reference for who Jesus is. So in order to make the story fit they suggest that what this actually is, is a story about Jesus from after the resurrection.

The resurrected Jesus wasn't always recognised, like on the road to Emmaus. He turned up in rooms with locked doors. He was here one minute and somewhere else a moment later. Clearly the resurrected Jesus was more gloriously divine, so a theory to explain the transfiguration would fit **IF** it was a story from after the resurrection.

The only problem with that is the opening words of the author Luke.

I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke ch 1)

It's unlikely that Luke would put a post resurrection appearance of Jesus before he had travelled to Jerusalem and the crucifixion. Trying to make things fit will tie you in knots. Sometimes you simply have to live with the mystery and the strangeness of it.

What happens when we read any book is that we begin to picture the scenes and the characters in our imagination. The way we begin to know Jesus Christ is to read about him and begin to form an understanding of him...as much as we are able. What challenges that process are the stories that are outside any frame of reference we begin to shape. Things that don't seem to fit.

I had a friend who couldn't believe the miracles and came up with a whole raft of explanations for everything outside our normal human experience.

The feeding of the 5,000 only happened because a small boy was generous with his own food. This led everyone else to start sharing the food they had previously hidden from each other.

Jesus wasn't walking on water, the boat was really close to the shore and he was simply in very shallow water – and so on.

What my friend was trying to do was to understand Jesus in a very narrow frame of reference that excluded any possibility of something mysterious or unexplainable. He was trying to make Jesus more believable...or so he thought. He was always going to struggle to explain the resurrection.

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By the time of the transfiguration the Disciples had got used to being surprised by this extra-ordinary person, but seeing Jesus in a glorified state accompanied by two historic figures was just too much to comprehend. It was too much to grasp.

Luke – our careful author – doesn't try to explain it. He just leaves us with the mystery of it and Peter floundering around wanting to build shelters for the three central characters.

The lectionary planners have helped us out in trying to grasp it by reminding us of the story of Moses. Something like this has happened before. When Moses spent time with God his face glowed and shone and so freaked everyone out that Moses had to wear a veil over his face.

Ah yes (we can say). We don't understand it, but being in God's presence and being divine changes the appearance. But our enquiring minds want to know what it means for us today.

There is a second transfiguration story and it's the boy down the mountain. He's described as demon possessed. When I read the story what comes to my mind is epilepsy and other people doing hermeneutics have come to that conclusion themselves.

Did the disciples fail to heal the boy because they don't know what they are dealing with? When Jesus arrives it's another of those occasions when he appears to lose his cool.

41 "You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here."

It's hard to interpret what is going on for Jesus. Eugene Peterson translates the story this way, in *The Message*.

What a generation! No sense of God! No focus to your lives! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this? Bring your son here.

My own interpretation is this.

Jesus has been on a mountaintop, accompanied by and encouraged by two great figures of Israel's history. God the Father has spoken again from the cloud. He has been thinking about what lay ahead and the end of his time on earth.

And then he is right back down in the valley where nothing has changed and his chosen disciples (who are to carry on the mission after the ascension) are helpless and confused. For Jesus it's a kind of 'here we go again' moment.

Two transfiguration stories – the mystery of Jesus appearance and the sick boy made well – he is transfigured too.

Two accounts of Jesus we might struggle to accommodate. His glorious appearance and his testy, frustrated moment.

Two failures of the disciples to grasp the situation. Peter doesn't know what is happening, why it's happening or what to do about it. The other nine disciples have failed to minister to a sick boy even though previously they have healed the sick. Their faith has failed and they are at a loss to know what to do.

How do these two stories lend themselves to following Jesus Christ?

The meaning of Jesus transfiguration is found in the transfiguration for the boy. Jesus' glory is seen as his kingdom is revealed in the lives of those of us who live in the Valley.

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Heidi Neumark has written a book called *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*.

For 20 years she served at the Transfiguration Lutheran Church. She wrote – Standing amid poverty and the myriad problems that can accompany such a demon – crime, drug abuse, lack of education, opportunity and a lack of hope, the church mostly kept the doors tight shut against the world.

But the words of rebuke that Jesus spoke to the demon in the scripture we read today were her inspiration.

She continues. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighbourhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty...they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others.

The Transfiguration of Jesus loses its power if we don't read it alongside the healing of the boy. Transfiguration isn't about living in the rarefied air of a mountaintop, but the transfiguration that is possible in the valley where we live.

We cannot re-locate our church to the Bronx, but that's not to say there isn't poverty and need here in Sunningdale. Perhaps we should allow our Transforming Trinity project to be Transfiguration at Trinity to keep us focussed.

If all we do is re-arrange the furniture and make it warmer...we can expect Jesus to speak some heated words about us being a perverse generation.

If our motivation is to see transfiguration in our lives and the lives of the community we shall be fulfilling Christ's mission.

For today.

What do you bring to Jesus to be transfigured?

Revd Jon Hutchinson, 27/2/22