

Sermon – St Peter’s, March 2nd, 2025. Transfiguration

I’m going to jump straight in today. Straight into the heart of what I think today’s readings are about.

Every time we hear a sermon it is talking *about* God. It is unpacking all the signposts that say, ‘follow this path and you will find God’. ‘Give away all your possessions and you will draw closer to God.’ So often the gospels are saying ‘God is like this’, or ‘God is like that.’ The realm of God is like a pearl of great price.’ ‘Life in God is like the actions of a good Samaritan.’

What the transfiguration does is go past the signposts – like this, like that - and takes us directly to a 1-1 encounter with God. The transfiguration says, ‘this is the face of God.’ Stand still and see that, as it says in today’s reading, ‘the appearance of Jesus’ face changed, and Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white.’

Last time I was up here breaking open the readings, we found Jesus praying alone. His disciples approached him, and he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ They answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Messiah of God.’ It is important to note that in Luke’s gospel, the gospel we read from today, this encounter of asking ‘But who do you say that I am?’ is placed immediately before today’s gospel reading of the transfiguration. I think that the writer of Luke’s gospel is saying, ‘But who do you say that I am? Come with me up the mountain and I will give you the answer. I will show you who I am.’

Let’s backtrack for a moment.

Despite the story of the transfiguration appearing in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, New Testament accounts do not name the mountain upon which the transfiguration occurred; however, tradition holds to two possible sites: Mount Tabor and Mount Hermon. If it took place on Mt Hermon, it took place on a mountain that lies near the border with Lebanon; it is one of the most significant strategic locations in the territory. As the highest mountain in what is now Syria, it provides a plateau for observation across the region.

In the Bible, Mount Hermon denotes the northern boundary of the Transjordan, the edge of the Amorite territory, and it marks the border to the terrain associated with the tribe of Manasseh. It represents the northwestern limit of Israelite conquest under Moses and Joshua. And what of the location of Mt Hermon in today's geopolitical world? Today the mountain of the Transfiguration is a borderland; here the countries of Lebanon, Syria and Israel meet. Can you imagine standing at the top of Mt Hermon today and looking over Lebanon, Syria and Israel? If ever there were a place where the Holy One needs to shout out the existence and necessity of love!

The scene is a mountain top. Mountains, like Gothic cathedrals, have a way of forcing our eyes heavenward, giving us an elevated, heavenly perspective. Mountains are often perceived as the place where heaven and earth touch, the place of divine dwelling, the cosmic mountain as sacred centre, and the place of divine revelation and vision. Mountains serve as the abodes of the gods.

Mountains are where important things happen, particularly theophanies, manifestations, or appearances of God. Think of Abraham, Noah, Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah and the various mountains associated with them: Mt. Zion, Mt. Sinai, Mt. Tabor, Mt. of Olives, Mt. Hor, Mt. Moriah, Mt. Ararat, Mt. Nebo, Mt. Carmel and yes, Mt Hermon. All of these biblical ancestors had a transformative encounter with the untamed, transcendent God on a mountaintop. Whether it was a vision, a covenant promise, a transfiguration—encounters with God happened in landscapes that were not domesticated. Such landscapes—dangerous and surprising—signified the presence of the dangerous and surprising God.

I take this a step further. Although we don't know, I wouldn't be surprised if this scene took place at dawn, again stressing the import of the liminal nature of this experience, the time between night and day.

In every sense, then, the transfiguration occurred in a liminal place, a place where the membrane between this realm and whatever else exists is gossamer thin, a place where the Other implodes onto us.

But here's the thing about the transfiguration - it is strongly argued that it is the disciples, rather than Jesus, who are transfigured. The Eastern Church does not call this story the Feast of the Transfiguration. Rather, they call it the Feast of the Metamorphosis. Metamorphosis – the feast of conversion,

of change. The Eastern Church considers that it is the disciples, not Christ, who are changed. Their perception is enlarged, their understanding is transfigured. Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky explains: 'The Transfiguration was not a phenomenon circumscribed in time and space; Christ underwent no change at that moment, even in his human nature, but a change occurred in the awareness of the apostles, who for a time received the power to see their Master as He was, resplendent in the eternal light of His Godhead. The apostles were taken out of history and given a glimpse of eternal realities.' The change occurs in the disciples to the extent that they allow themselves to become not spectators but participants in the divinity revealed to them. The Transfiguration event is truly a liminal event, a threshold of the divine as the disciples are caught up into the radiant light of Christ.

The Feast of the Transfiguration, of Metamorphosis, is inviting each of us to see Jesus as he always is. As with Moses in the first reading, we are invited to climb the mountain and see the face of God.

I have never seen the face of God – except for 5,000 times a day. Constantly I am brought up short when I realise that God is here, and here, and here. In this person, in this tree, in this sunset, in this echidna. To be walking each day with the question of 'where is God in this place?' Mary Oliver writes in one of her poems that 'Belief isn't always easy', but that she has learned 'If not enough else / To live with my eyes open. Former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams suggests that "one of the tests of actual faith, as opposed to bad religion, is whether it stops you ignoring things". Such faith Williams says is "most fully itself and most fully life-giving when it opens your eyes and uncovers for you a world larger than you thought".

As I said earlier, the Feast of the Transfiguration, of Metamorphosis, is inviting each of us to see Jesus as he always is. And the invitation to us is for us to become what we already are. To live into knowing that we are made in love, by love, for love.

The tradition has long said our task is to become what we already are. Theologian and spiritual director Philip Carter says, 'becoming what we are is a breathtaking experience for us.' Which doesn't mean perfection. Rowan Williams puts it this way: 'It's not about perfection – it doesn't matter if the window is flawed or damaged...as long as the light gets through... All that counts is that some people are so knocked sideways by God that they

make space for the divine life to come through and that they stay there where God has met them, with God's action and life pouring through their own confused and very human hearts and minds and bodies, letting the earth be renewed.'

This is about tapping into the incorruptible part of us that is love. Nothing can or will separate us from this Love. Again to draw on Philip Carter, Philip asks, 'can we let the transfigured Christ seduce us? Can we let ourselves fall in love with love, the love of a God who pours God's self out in creation and incarnation, anticipates the future through his transfiguration, and sets it in motion through his resurrection?'

Thomas Merton said it this way: 'I have the immense joy of being a member of a race in which God became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realise what we all are. And if only everyone could realise this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.'

Can we allow ourselves to be open to the reality that we are all walking around shining like the sun?

Interestingly, if we look at the first reading today, of Moses coming down from Mt Sinai with the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. It was Aaron and all the Israelites who looked at Moses and, noticing Moses' transfiguration, were afraid to come near him. We need each other to affirm that we see the face of God in each other, to point out when it is that we see the other shining like the sun. We do this God-life in community. The Christ revealed in you, the Christ revealed in me. Let me tell you of where I see Christ in you. I ask you to reveal to me the Christ that you see in me.

We are constantly being transfigured. It is not a one-off experience. I need you to reveal God-self to me so that I may open myself ever more into love.

One final thing. When Jesus gathered his disciples around him, time and again he gathered into his inner circle the two sets of brothers, James and John, Peter and Andrew. And yet only three of these people ascend with Jesus. As we read the accounts, it seems that a fourth disciple is missing. Jesus takes John and James, and Peter, but leaves behind Andrew – two sets of brothers, minus one. It is as if Andrew hangs back to create a space for you or me. We can take his place – we can be the fourth person and join in the journey up the mountain, risking change, risking confrontation, risking saying yes to who we already are. Let's give it a go. It looks like we have some mountain climbing to do.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

Luke 9.28-36**The Transfiguration**

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Exodus 34.29-35**The Shining Face of Moses**

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

2 Cor 3.12-4.2

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing

at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. **Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.** Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. **And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.**

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Psalm 99

Praise to God for His Holiness

The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

The Lord is great in Zion;

he is exalted over all the peoples.

Let them praise your great and awesome name.

Holy is he!

Mighty King, lover of justice,

you have established equity;

you have executed justice

and righteousness in Jacob.

Extol the Lord our God;

worship at his footstool.

Holy is he!

Moses and Aaron were among his priests,

Samuel also was among those who called on his name.

They cried to the Lord, and he answered them.

He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;

they kept his decrees,

and the statutes that he gave them.

*O Lord our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
Extol the Lord our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the Lord our God is holy.*