

The Transfiguration

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Introduction

Life is full of transformations. Change is the essence of living. Transformations reveal the essence of things. A nondescript grub becomes something beautiful with the capacity to fly. Age will sometimes reveal the essence hidden in youth, for good or ill.

I know that people struggle with change. Yet we are creatures made for change, for growth for transformation.

Celebrity and consumer culture taps into this everyday. It might be new fashions in clothes or home decoration, cars or entertainment. Consumer culture believes that by changing the outside we change who we are. Check the ads from gyms to tattooists.

The story of the transfiguration and the readings for today introduce us to a different world of change. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus is well known. God's glory shines through Jesus and specifically in the coming great events that will take place in Jerusalem: the crucifixion and the resurrection.

In the Gospel story the event occurs at about the midpoint of Jesus' ministry but liturgically we celebrate Transfiguration at the end of the season of Epiphany, so out of historical sequence. The reason is that it is, apart from the resurrection, the last great 'showing' of Jesus. We have already in Epiphany spoken of Jesus' manifestation to the Gentiles, in his baptism, the wedding in Cana and in the synagogue at Nazareth. Transfiguration brings that sequence to a climax as Jesus' true nature is revealed to the disciples.

So the story begins and ends with glory: God's glory

God's glory

The readings all talk about this thing named glory. You really can't define glory in any abstract way. It is best to approach it through pictures.

Perhaps a good metaphor is the sun. And that is the image used in the bible from time to time. In fact, in the story about Moses the word used means that the glory looked like horns. Moses has been drawn with horns coming out his head. Think of rays of sun.

The central aspect of glory is light. We need light for life. We need light to see. Human beings cannot be locked up and deprived of light for long without going mad or losing all sense of who they are and where they are.

Another aspect takes that further: glory is overpowering light. You can't continue to look at the sun without blindness following. I have watched several full eclipses. You need special filters that tone down the intensity; otherwise the focused, intense light might destroy your eyesight. Light is powerful, light can destroy by its sheer power.

Great energy generates light. Getting close to great energy like the sun means destruction. We cannot approach it safely.

On the other hand, light is also beauty. Light mediates extraordinary beauty to us. Watching an eclipse, seeing the diamond ring effect is a thing of great beauty. But seeing and perceiving the surrounding beauty of the earth and trees and birds gives great pleasure. Light reveals. In the reflection of light there is great joy. Without light we would not see the beauty. It is why some painters try and capture light and explore it.

In a way all this is a picture of God. It is a metaphor, an analogy, to try and understand something about God. God's energy is so great we don't stand a chance in its presence; we need protection. God's glory has all the beauty of light and reflects all the beauty of light. All we can do is reflect it, not be sources of it.

God's glory is really God's character, the energy of god's nature. It is about love and justice, about care for the poor and unwanted. God's glory is about God's commitment to offering himself to all and each. God's glory is about God working ways to reverse the mess we find ourselves in.

One of the tragedies of the human condition is that we often try to be the source of light and energy; hence human pomp and circumstance.

Having said all that, how can we be in contact with such powerful, overwhelming light? To answer that question the Gospel reading turns our attention to Jesus.'

Jesus and Glory

The NT writers make one thing clear. Jesus mediates God's glory to us. They don't have particular theories about it. For them it was gospel — good news. It is now possible that we could approach the Sun and the Sun could approach us and we would not be destroyed. The energy could be mediated to us.

The transfiguration story makes that abundantly clear. God is not remote; God is not so overwhelming we might be destroyed. Here is someone designated Son and called to bear the burden of glory so we can see it.

Jesus is neither Moses nor Elijah (see 18-19) nor any other great prophet from Israel's past. He bears a glory and authority greater than all those combined. Jesus is a prophet certainly but far more with more authority. Jesus' glory is not reflected glory as is that of Moses and Elijah; his change reflects the revealing of his inner nature. He is not a mirror but the source of the reflection himself.

The Word of God identifies the glory of Jesus in three ways: as the Son of God (Psalm 2), as the Servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 42.1) and as the prophet messiah in the line of but surpassing Moses and Elijah. Unlike the baptism where the Word of God speaks to Jesus here the disciples are addressed. The disciples must hear God's witness, recognize Jesus' authority to call them and demand of them their life commitment to the kingdom.

This same one is the one who will go on to an exodus in Jerusalem, on to suffering and pain, a cross and humiliation. Glory is linked for the first time to humiliation.

This is where all our analogies break down. No one thought of this. How can a glory, of which the sun is but a candle flame in comparison, hide itself under humanity and in humility? Won't the energy burst forth and destroy its tormentors?

The answer is a simple no. There is a humiliating journey, an exodus to tread before the energy of glory can burst forth. Herein lies the mystery of prayer.

This story is set in prayer. There are some important points to note. This is a moment of prayer for Jesus. We have noted that prayer is one of the themes of the Gospel of Luke and this moment is set in prayer. Jesus prays before Peter's confession (9.18), he takes to the mountain to pray (28-29). The moment of revelation and manifestation is a moment of prayer.

Prayer is the channel for that energy because that energy is relational and personal. The glory of God will only be comprehended in prayer. Prayer is the focusing of the glory because prayer is not mechanical and magical, but loving, agonising, hopeful and trusting.

The glory of the people of God lies in prayer. It does lie in its wealth, buildings or pomp, or the crassness for that matter, of its liturgy. It lies in the prayers of agony, love, hope joy, fear and trust that we engage in.

So what about disciples and glory?

Disciples and Glory

To understand this, we need to contrast what Paul says about glory and what happens in the transfiguration story.

In the story disciples make three instructive but wrong moves. The first one is that they take a nap. Prayer for and on behalf of the world and its peoples is all a bit tiring. It may be the most important priestly activity but it is all too much: too much agony and empathy, too much trust, too much loving; too many possibilities for change.

The second wrong move is that they think that Jesus, Moses and Elijah are all on the same level. That is one reason for the three huts they want to build. The cloud and word of God make clear that they have made a seriously wrong move. Moses and Elijah may have reflected the glory of God but Jesus radiates it. That is his calling.

The third wrong move they make is to try and capture the presence of the glory and make it useful for them; make it amenable to their perceptions and goals, which certainly did not include suffering, humiliation and a cross.

These wrong moves are here because they characterise much of our stumbling attempts at spirituality. Instead of being caught up into God's kingdom we want to capture and domesticate it. A tame glory that needs feeding once a week, less than the cat, might be our idea of useful one. But it is not the glory of the mount of transfiguration, on the way to the cross.

That is why when Paul reflected on this idea in the epistle we read he introduced his readers to the Spirit. Unlike those early disciples we know that the humiliation was transformed, that light could not be contained by death, that glory and all its energy would be set free. It is in the Spirit that that now takes place among us.

The energy of God would not bind people. It freed people to enter into the glory of God's love. The Spirit would bring the same unleashing of the resurrection into the lives of men and women. And would continue to do so.

But such an unleashing would mean transformation. It means transformation towards the character of God. Christian spirituality is about connection and character. We connect in the Spirit to the glory, and we are transformed in character to the glory. That way we reflect the glory. It does not matter how poorly.

Conclusion

From such an unleashing of glory we may have confidence. And more than anything else that is what we need.

The way to boldness and confidence is listening. Listening is a divine command. Glory will come only in prayer to disciples wide awake who are willing to listen to and obey the word of the Son, the Chosen, and follow him to Jerusalem.