

Choose your direction of change

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Transfiguration, 14 February 2010

Exodus 34.29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinth 3.12-4.2; Luke 9.28-36

One of the things I like to do is to watch movies—particularly old movies. In a bookshop I always end up thumbing through the biographies of old actors and looking at still photographs from their movies. One thing that I find intriguing is the way actors create a whole identity for themselves and their public. They create identities out of thin air. Frances Gumm transfigured herself and her image into Judy Garland. Norma Jean became Marilyn Monroe. Archibald Leach became Cary Grant. And what about Marion Morrison? Would you have paid to see him in the movies? Well you did—he became John Wayne. These people, for good or bad, went through a process of change.

In the Bible many people got new names to go with a new life and a new image. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. Jacob became Israel. Saul became Paul. Simon became Peter. Change is one thing that today's gospel is about. On the mountaintop Jesus is transfigured, changed in appearance. In the Greek the word is *metamorphosis*.

Change of one type or another is something common to all of us, not just movie stars and characters from the bible. Transfigurations are not the exception. They are the rule. We are all being altered in the appearance of our inner life, our face, our countenance. We are all changing. To live is to be continually transfigured. Some people do not appear to have changed at all. But change is happening to them as well. However the direction of change is in the same pattern. Some people are like water that has become ice and then they stay in the freezer for the next 50 years getting harder and harder, more crystallized and dried out. The reality is that everyday we make choices and decisions that determine our direction of change.

The festival of the Transfiguration has actually been something of a minor remembrance in the Western church. In the protestant faiths we tend to give it a bit of wide berth. Our rational minds struggle with the fantastical element. However, in the Eastern Orthodox Church it is considered one of the major celebrations. For the orthodox it is central to their understanding that all Christians are ultimately caught up in the glory of God. They call the process *theosis*. It is the process of the transformation of a believer who is putting into practice the spiritual teachings of Jesus Christ and His gospel. For the orthodox *Theosis* is the third of three stages; the first is *katharsis* or purification. The second is *theoria* or illumination. So the process is *katharthis*, *theoria* and finally *theosis*. I think the Orthodox have got it right. The transfiguration is not some fairy story we tell ourselves. It points us to the perfection of the spiritual journey of following the Christ, the end point of a life lived in the shadow and power of the cross. Some of you may know that in India, the traditional greeting is *Namaste*—the God in me greets the God in you. In our Christian tradition the passing of the peace of God is much the same thing: with new eyes opened we recognize the God in each other. We recognize our transformed humanness.

The story of Jesus transfiguration is a story of choice and change. It is of course a story absolutely thick with theological and biblical references—Elijah and Moses, dwellings or tents, mountaintops, clouds and more. If you have the inclination it is wonderful exercise to pull it apart and see all the connections the writer makes. In this story God affirms the life and character of Jesus. All the choices Jesus has made, everything he has done and taught and lived and said is affirmed in this moment. Everything. Jesus has become and is recognized as

the true human, the best and perfect human. It is his transformed humanness that becomes our hope and our own potential transformation. On the mountain God makes the same declaration as he made at Jesus baptism. “This is my son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased”.

So what are the choices Jesus made to receive this affirmation? What is it about Jesus that makes him someone to whom God directs us to listen, to learn from? To know this we have to put the transfiguration story into the context of the rest of the gospel. Just prior to Jesus taking that trek up the mountain with his three friends he has been in the district of Caesarea Philippi. In this section of the story Jesus concentrates on training the twelve.

He begins to teach about what will become the Easter story and the journey leading up to it. He says those amazing words to his followers: *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”*. The cross is intrinsic to the story of transfiguration and our transformation. It is intrinsic to our faith (shadow of the cross—above altar, pulpit and church). The cross means many things, some of which I am going to be reflecting on through lent, but it certainly means a journey into danger, uncertainty and death. His disciples, as we know, struggle with this and find it really hard to accept. But it is a journey that Jesus has already accepted. By this stage in the story he has set his face to Jerusalem and has made his choice. He has chosen to be obedient to God and to go wherever God leads him. We who have heard the end to this story of the cross know this path also leads to new, resurrected life. The transfiguration prefigures this resurrected life, a life that shines with God’s glory and being.

The Revd Dr Scott Cowdell, one of our diocesan theologians, makes the wonderful point that in our liturgy, our worship, we are participating in the transfiguration. The architecture of church buildings, the air, full of music and smells, the Eucharistic vestments of the celebrant, are all symbolic of our union with the divine and our participation in Jesus glorified life. On the mountain Peter, John and James were blessed and strengthened by a transfigured vision of life and their friend Jesus. In each Eucharistic celebration we are blessed and strengthened as we are drawn into the same vision. We go to that place where, ‘the reign of sin is ended, a broken world is restored and we are made whole once more’. In our sharing of the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, we are taken up into heaven, into the realm of angels and pure love. We act out *theosis*.

So the transfiguration story is not some supernatural event from the past that has no place in our own reality. Instead the transfiguration is about us. The fact is we are being transformed, changed all the time. It happens step-by-step, little by little, whether you know it or not. On the one hand we can let life buffet us around. We can react to all the slings and arrows of fortune with very little thought. In this mode we go by our natural instincts – repaying wrong for wrong, holding on to our possessions and wealth for dear life, not forgiving and holding on to our hurts and resentments. We keep repeating the mistakes of the past.

Or we can make the decision to follow the Christ. God said to the disciples on mount Hermon – *“Listen to him”*. We listen to him because as Paul reminded us in the Corinthians reading, *the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. When we turn to the Lord, the veil that sets us apart from God’s glory is removed and all of us, with unveiled faces are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*. We turn to Jesus, we listen to him and follow him because he is fullness of life for us and for our world.

Ash Wednesday takes place next week. This remembrance inaugurates not simply the 40 days preceding Easter but the whole 90-day paschal cycle, which extends beyond Easter seven weeks until Pentecost. There is one mystery that is being revealed in this cycle. It is the

time then to think about our part in this mystery – what does the cross mean for us? What have we to do with Christ’s destiny? What does transfiguration, *theosis*, look and feel like for us? It is a time for us to listen and to make decisions that lead to new life. It is time to reflect on our faith and the way in which we follow Jesus.

May all our choices be life giving ...

“O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain. Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into the likeness from glory to glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.” Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*