

Transfiguration Sunday

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By Sarah Hills

Introduction

The transfiguration is a turning point in the church's year. The transfiguration of Jesus bridges the season of Epiphany with the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday is only days away. So we look back to the astonishing revelation that Jesus is divine and we look ahead to his suffering and death on the cross. There are many echoes in the words of glory and of suffering that we hear, the picture that is painted for us of these times, high on the mountain in the cloud.

Text

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

Comment

I have recently returned from South Africa, where in Cape Town, glory and suffering..suffering and glory..are juxtaposed in stark relief against each other..the beauty of the landscape, the mountain, the sea..and the effects of continuing injustice, poverty, poor education for most, and violence.

In the story of the transfiguration, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray. And they see His glory. They see Jesus with new eyes, they experience him, terrified as they were, as 'God's chosen'. And they are told to listen to him! The question before us, then as we too are enabled today to see Jesus with new eyes as we hear of his transfiguration is, 'What are we going to see with those

new eyes?’

I was told recently about an article in a German newspaper relating to the refugee crisis. There was an inn, a beer cellar, in a small mountain village, which had been closed. A Syrian refugee family had been placed there, as temporary housing. One day, a couple who had been out hiking all day, came to the village and saw the sign outside the inn...which was still there...‘beer cellar’. They went in, sat down at one of the tables, and waited for the waiter to come. After a while, a man came through from the kitchen and they asked him if they could have a menu. He said, no sorry, we don’t have any menus. And they were a bit puzzled, but assuming that the inn had stopped serving food for the day, they asked him if he could at least give them something quick and easy for the kitchen staff to prepare. The man went back into the kitchen, and came out again with some plates of food. They then asked for some beer, and he said, ‘No I’m sorry we don’t drink beer..but I could make you some freshly brewed coffee or some herbal tea’. Only at this stage, did the couple realise what was going on – they had stepped into the refugees’ home and he had given them his own food and drink. The couple were terribly embarrassed and tried to pay him, but he would have none of it. He was delighted to have been able to offer them hospitality, that as a refugee he had himself received.

Jesus invites us to see with new eyes, to see afresh, to turn what we know on its head, to look from ‘the other’s perspective’.

The transfiguration that the three disciples witnessed gave them the chance to see with new eyes. In the transfigured face of Jesus, they saw the connection to their Jewish roots in Moses and Elijah, their history, their story...and the journey to come as Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem. Jesus is seen as ‘the Chosen,’ the one who has come in fulfilment of all the law and the prophets.

In his humanity we see nothing less than Israel’s God who had once disclosed himself in another transfiguration at a burning bush and had spoken his sacred name. All that has taken place so far has been leading to this, this glory. And, as we know, from now on, the light darkens as we journey towards Good Friday – but we now know what we didn’t know before, which is that the man destined to die is none other than ‘The Beloved, the Chosen’, the son of God.

What is our faith about, if not to confess Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God? Mark is telling us that those words, that vision, are transformative, transfigurative. They change us, our world, our life. They transfigure us. We see and experience our world afresh. We live in our bodies in new ways. We experience our relationships in this new light, this glorious, transfigured light. What we see is God’s presence...in all of this. His glory.

Table Mountain in Cape Town, like the mountain where Jesus, Peter, James and John were, also gets covered by a cloud, called ‘the tablecloth’. It is a glorious place. A place which has witnessed great transformation, a bringing of light out of the darkness of apartheid.

And it would be very tempting to stop there. To say we too are transformed, transfigured by this glory, the glory of the Christ, who is indeed, for us as well as those disciples that day on the mountain, the Messiah, our Saviour. Certainly Peter’s first instinct was to want to stay there on the mountain...to ‘capture’ the glory, by erecting dwellings, tents...to house, to clothe the glory...to contain it. To keep it ‘precious’, safe. And I think this is often our instinct too...mine at least. We glimpse God’s glory...in music, in painting, in love, in the glory of a high mountain. But we cannot stay there...we cannot just contain Jesus in a tent, or a building, beautiful as it may be. Yes, of course we should celebrate glory. Celebrate and rejoice in His majesty.

But we must also come down from the mountain. At the bottom of Table Mountain are the Cape Flats....a dry, dusty, seemingly God-forsaken place, to which the people who were the 'wrong colour' during apartheid were forcibly removed. That is where Jesus is too...in the messiness, the confusion of life and death, the suffering of poverty and HIV/AIDs and drug addiction and gang violence. That is where the transfiguration takes us. That is where we must be too. Jesus brings light into that darkness...he transfigures...shines...in the midst of the disciples confusion, in the midst of our dry and dusty and broken world. And it is when we can link the two together...the darkness of our world, and the glory of the mountain top that we can truly see afresh...that we can hear anew those words...This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'. And we have to listen to him! We celebrate his glory, yes – 'The heavens declare the glory of God' in the psalms. Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote, 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will shine out like shining from shook foil.'

Irenaeus the great Christian teacher of the 2nd century said, 'The glory of God is man fully alive'. God is with us in his glory when we make a new scientific discovery; when we throw a stick in the woods for our dog; when we look at the new greens of spring, when we come together to worship.

And that is all good and right and proper. But glory is not only to be found in the exciting and marvellous. On the mountain. It leads us, calls us into something much bigger and wilder and more glorious than we can imagine. Jesus takes us into the most surprising places ...to the refugee camps; to our prisons; to our street corners. As we celebrate the light, the shining of Jesus face, the glory, let us also be aware of the dark, the suffering, the conflict...let us look with new eyes at our world. This glory is not ours to keep inside a dwelling, a church building...it enables us to be fully present in the world's suffering and conflict as disciples of Christ – disciples who can bring a glimpse of hope and God's glory into the world.

Response

The question for us today, this day of transfiguration, just before we start our journey into Lent, is ...are we prepared to come down off the mountain? To really allow ourselves to be transfigured? Transformed? To see anew? As we look into the face of the transfigured and glorious Christ, what are we going to see with our new eyes? And what are we going to do, who are we going to be, made new as followers of Christ in the world, as we come down off the mountain?

Prayer

Great and bright shining Lord,
Who was transfigured before the eyes of the disciples on that mountain top

Alter our gaze today,
to see in the midst of our darkness,
and the darkness of our world,
The transforming power of your presence
which was dazzling white on that mountain long ago.

Grant us the courage Lord
To leave that hilltop of transfiguration,
to walk among the pain of the world's suffering
as bearers of your hope and glory.

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey