

Living in Glory: The Transfiguration of Christ
19th February 2023: The Sunday Before Lent

What does it mean to live in Glory? Does it look like success? Celebrity status? Beauty? Power? Is our glory dependent on our leadership style? The size of our army? Or the number of Instagram followers? The letters after our name? Or the clothes we wear?

This is the kind of glory that the world of capitalism and consumerism tries to sell us. This is the kind of glory that defines success and failure by our wealth, the size of our house, the thinness of our waist, the latest gadget in our hand. This is the kind of glory that prides itself on division, bullying, an endless debate of who's in and who's out.

However, it doesn't have to be this way, we don't have to be trapped in this damaging cycle of a consumer culture which prides itself on fostering insecurity and anxiety. In our Gospel today, we come face to face with an alternative way of being glorious, you don't need to be rich, or famous or even beautiful (even though you all are). The only condition is that you need to be human.

In our Gospel story, we meet Jesus ascending a high mountain with his closest friends, Peter, James and John. It is in this most intimate of moments, arguably with who Jesus trusts most that the divinity of Christ breaks through and manifests itself. On the top of the mountain Matthew tells us that Jesus is transfigured. The word transfigure is an odd one, it can be defined as something (or someone) becoming more spiritual or more beautiful. It is an outward often physical change or transformation that proceeds from the inside and changes the whole person. The Gospel tells us that Jesus' face shines like the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white.

Are Peter, James and John seeing a vision or a material change? It's hard to know, certainly Matthew is emphasising the parallels with Moses on Sinai. In the corresponding Exodus reading, Moses' face was so radiant he had to veil it, and he reflected the glory of God in this radiance when he descended the mountain. However, if Jesus is to be understood as the culmination of the law and the prophets, or as the final Moses or the Son of God, then something else is happening here, it's not just a physical change or a strange vision.

I'd like to suggest that this is a powerful episode where Jesus' true preincarnate glory shines through his humanity. It is important to note that the disciples are the intended recipients of this glorious event, and by extension we are too, as Matthew says in chapter 13 of his gospel, 'the righteous will shine like the sun' (13:43). Simply put, Matthew is highlighting to us that we too can experience glory, we can in fact be glorious just by witnessing to and being in relationship with Christ.

You might be (quite rightly) asking why Jesus needed to be transfigured when we already know he is God Incarnate, fully divine fully human. Why does he have to show us? You'd be forgiven, as centuries of Christology has taught us that Jesus, by definition, is the perfect man. By this point in Matthew's Gospel, Peter has declared his faith and Jesus has called himself the Messiah, so it can seem a bit strange that there needed to be some sort of physical change (accompanied by Moses and Elijah) for three of his closest disciples to recognise Christ's divinity. However, as Peter evidences to us in his response to Jesus' transfiguration (by wanting to build tents!), we can still slip up, try and put God into human definitions and not fully understand what Christ's glory entails.

I'd like to suggest that the transfiguration happens because Jesus knew that in order for people to get to know him, get to know God, they needed space and time, and I think we need to be

aware of this when we share our faith today. It's not until chapter 17 of Matthew's Gospel that Jesus' three closest friends are able to witness this moment of profound holiness, and to hear God saying, 'This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him'.

I wonder whether Jesus knew it would take them that long to be ready to recognise the miracle?

I wonder whether Jesus knew they needed time to think and question before they could start to comprehend the Son of God as the Son of Man?

Similarly, when we share our faith with others, it's never as simple as giving a few quick answers, an invitation to sing a few worship songs, and bam! Baptism, new life in Christ, bish bash bosh, haven't we done a good job?! No, the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of Christ is a slow unveiling of God's love, God's mystery and this takes time. It is through kindness, relationship, conversation, and a genuine commitment to live alongside others where people can encounter something of God's divinity, God's love. This unveiling is life long, it takes time, and glimpses of Christ's glory may come and go, and still we may not or never will fully understand.

Let's look at Peter as an example. In the previous chapter, Jesus exhorts him to build God's church, he is the rock! As far as disciples go, Peter is all in, he's given all he is to follow Jesus, and Jesus and him are evidently very close, in fact it's Peter that often accompanies Jesus at his most intimate and vulnerable moments, you'd think he'd know his friend pretty well. And yet, at the moment of transfiguration, Peter still gets it wrong. In response to seeing Jesus, in dazzling white talking to Moses and Elijah, he says, '*Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*', and then, rather comically he is interrupted by God speaking from a cloud. I can imagine myself in Peter, desperately trying to make sense of what's going on by attempting to bring some order to the scenario, he wants to fix the moment of revelation into that time and place, forgetting that however much we might try to, we cannot constrain God or divinity, and we certainly can't contain it for ourselves. In that sense, he makes the very human error of trying to box up glory – keep it manageable and bounded before God's voice completely terrifies himself, James and John, so much so that they fall on their faces in abject fear.

However, Jesus' glory is as such that he still touches them, reassures them and cares for them. Here is the glorified Lord, among his friends soothing them with kind words and a gentle hand. His divinity doesn't supersede his humanity, but rather confirms it. His glory is because he is fully human, and fully God, and this is brought into stark reality with Jesus' comment when the four return down the mountain, '*tell no-one about the vision until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead*'. This is the last of the messianic secret passages in Matthew, and it highlights the fact that the true significance of Jesus can only be understood in the light of the cross and resurrection. Matthew suggests to us that we have to understand the Transfiguration, the glory of Christ through the most horrific moments of suffering.

At the start of the Gospel passage, we are witness to a private epiphany, an exalted Jesus, with garments glistening, standing on a high mountain and flanked by two religious giants of the past. All is light. At the other end we get a reminder about what is coming, a public spectacle, a humiliated Jesus, whose clothes have been torn from him and divided, abused, and lifted upon a cross and flanked by two convicted criminals. All is gone. All is darkness.

So in order to understand Christ's glory, in order to be part of that glory as we journey into Lent, we have to try, in our life long journeys of faith to grasp what seems so confusing and mysterious, that the majesty and glory of Jesus is both in the beautiful awe-inspiring dazzling moments, but also in the suffering, humiliation and death upon the cross. It is perhaps best

described as the middle space. We can't have one without the other. We have to try and make sense of our glory not by being the best, not dazzling others with the bright lights of our success but simply by being authentic, honest and human, with all the flaws we carry with us. God didn't create us to be perfect, God created us to be loved and to love, and this is where our lights can shine brightest, where we too can be transfigured and experience glory for ourselves. We can't deny the horror of the cross or what that means, but we can enter into a life with Christ that is full of the glorious kind of love that even when we're completely terrified, God is there, saying again and again, 'Get up, don't be afraid'.

Amen.

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