Sermon C Transfiguration 2025\_Reflection\_C\_SCED

I am often asked to tell the story of that night of the Transfiguration when James and John and I accompanied Jesus to the top of a hill in Galilee, and shared in an utterly amazing experience. You’re probably surprised to hear that it was night. Yet why else would James and John and I be weighed down with sleep? Encouraging people to remember that the Transfiguration of Christ on the top of that hill took place on a dark night, somehow puts a new slant on it for them. You can probably imagine how trudging up to the top in the dark would not have been easy. I have a real fear of treading on snakes, so the whole expedition didn’t appeal to me. But Jesus wanted to go up to the top of a hill to pray. Jesus’ need to pray frequently and in solitude ‘(or semi-solitude) was well-known to us disciples and well-respected by us. These times of prayer led to great refreshment of clarity and purpose for him. We therefore knew that if he needed to pray that he should not be discouraged from doing so, no matter how dark the night, nor inhospitable the venue. Also, the call to prayer was becoming more and more compelling to me. Prayer is abandonment of oneself to God, and I was learning that the more I did that, the more I was empowered for the difficult challenges of the life of discipleship that I had chosen, or perhaps more accurately that had chosen me.

We struggled to the top, and could see by the light of the moon, that there was a clearing nestled in the middle of a rocky outcrop. It was like a small arena awaiting the playing out of some great dramatic moment. Jesus chose the clearing to pray, and we settled down against the shelter of the rocks to sleep, we thought, but there was a great and pregnant edginess that somehow despite our tiredness prevented sleep. I looked at Jesus. I could never stop myself stealing glances at this man who had become so beloved, so inspiring to me, and so central to the very meaning of my life. It had just been around a week before that I had felt moved in my Spirit, to name him Messiah, Son of the Living God. There was such a delicate lightness in his bearing, and a fine brightness of goodness and clarity in his demeanor… And I can’t begin to describe the stirrings of love that he inspired in me, and I know in many that he met. It was the eye of my own coarse and inarticulate understanding of love that I turned on him now. He hadn’t knelt to pray, but stood arms stretched towards the sky, in the typical Jewish gesture of prayer. But he was shining. I can’t find any other word to describe the picture I saw. He was shining. His face shone and his clothing was dazzlingly white. This was a light so intense, that it became unclear that it was indeed night. And as I gazed at Jesus two men materialized. They were our forebears Moses and Elijah. I don’t know how I recognized them, but something named them in my deepest being, and their names became a wisdom to me.

I often reflect on why these two were there. What purpose did they serve at this Transfiguration? Perhaps, they were there as two witnesses to testimony that Jesus would suffer and die and rise again. Testimony that God had already placed in Jesus’ heart, and that he needed to have confirmed by the presence of these patriarchs. Or it could have been that Moses was there to link Jesus’ imminent journey to Jerusalem with the remembrance of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt centuries before. Exodus is a word that in *koine* Greek can denote a range of meanings including journey, departure, and death. It therefore anticipated not just the imminent journey towards Jerusalem, but Jesus’ Passion and death. Elijah, now, he was meant to come first before the Messiah to herald his coming. Some had thought that Jesus himself might be Elijah. But to my mind their standing together as separate beings on that hill top disproved this hypothesis once and for all.

I don’t know how I got the rather bizarre notion that we should build booths or tents for these guests of Jesus the Messiah. I suppose I wanted to pay honour, offer respect to Jesus himself and our revered patriarchs. Also, I was tired, be-fuddled and confused. But barely before I could offer, a cloud came and overshadowed us. Momentarily Jesus, James, John and I were caught up into a cosmic sea of milky white vapour resounding with the voice of God naming his Son beloved. Visibility was low, but the scene resonated and pulsed with a life and a love and a liveliness that was immeasurable, and I’m sure will not be repeated in my lifetime.

All at once the cloud lifted and Jesus was alone, looking very much himself again. Dawn was beginning to break, so there was light that hemmed the darkness, glittering wanly on its very coat-tails. And in silence, we began to descend the hill.

Jesus, James and John and I never referred to the incident afterwards, as to do this would have seemed sacrilegious. No language could convey then what really happened, and even my description now seems inadequate to carry the sense of such a significant and deliberative moment. All I know is that the light of Christ that had come into the world as a light to all the nations, was now an intensified light of Transfiguration, confirming the presence of God in our teacher, Jesus. This filled me with a strange exhilaration, as it was mixed with foreboding…

Of course we all know what happened next; that this Transfiguration empowered Jesus to set his face towards Jerusalem and death. And now years later, when I celebrate this feast day of the new church of which I am a leader, I once again set my face towards Jerusalem, prepared in mind and heart and memory and Spirit to go there once again with Jesus my beloved teacher and friend, my Savior and my God.

I hope that Epiphany has been for you in some senses a season of light. That you have somehow by God’s grace caught a glimpse of the light of the nations. And I hope that today transfiguration will be experienced by you as an intensification of that passing season’s light. This was after all a brightness that did not desert Christ as he walked the Jerusalem road: a brightness that will not desert you and I as we prepare spiritually to accompany him once again through the pain of Passion and death. This light of Transfiguration is a sign of God’s presence for today, yet it can also be a reassuring and enduring memory that reveals itself in each dawn of the 40 days of Lent which are to come. Above all it is a steady intimation that the redemption of God in Christ is at hand.

Grace and peace from the Lord be with you…