

## **Last Sunday after Epiphany (Transfiguration): CCSY, 14 Feb 2010**

Exod 34:29-35; 2 Cor 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

Happy Chinese New Year! Today begins the year of the Tiger, a much-needed good portent, perhaps, for the world's #1 golfer! On our retail calendar, if not inscribed on the hearts of star-crossed lovers everywhere, it's Valentine's Day – a feast day removed from the Christian calendar, ironically, in that summer of love: 1969. How romantic! A salutary reminder of the Church's uncanny knack for completely misreading the moment – as in today's gospel, when Peter, personifying the infant church, seems to misinterpret the implications of the manifestation of glory he witnesses.

This last Sunday after Epiphany finishes the season with a flourish. And in the series of epiphanies set before us in recent weeks – the three wise men, Jesus' baptism, the wedding at Cana, and the great catch of fish – the Transfiguration is something of a show stopper: the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets in this prefiguring of Jesus' risen glory; at least these are the sort of terms in which we're used to receiving this familiar story.

Yet I wonder whether Peter's desire to build three dwellings is actually a better response to what he's seen than he appears to be given credit for in the text? Even if he didn't know quite what he was saying, Peter begins to articulate here the sacramental instinct by which the Church has long since sought to hold on to the traces of God's gracious presence – to catch up, as it were – to grasp fleetingly and belatedly the afterglow of these moments of recognition – of re-cognition: of seeing afresh what we thought we already knew. Significantly, in Luke's narrative the other such breathtaking moment happens at table, at the end of the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Wanting to make a booth for this transfigured Christ is not so very different from installing an aumbry in a parish church, that we might more readily attend to the transfiguration of all this glory into the ordinary stuff of bread.

Writing 120 years ago, Francis Paget, Canon of Christ Church in Oxford, had this to say about the sacramental worldview:

[T]hrough Sacramental elements and acts[,] Christianity maintains its strong inclusive hold upon the whole of life. The consecration of material elements to be the vehicles of Divine grace keeps up on earth that vindication and defence of the material against the insults of sham spiritualism which was achieved forever by the Incarnation . . . of Jesus Christ . . . [in] that the Eternal Word should be made man . . . so that a material body should be His body; His in birth, and growth, and death; His in all its relations with the visible world; His for suffering, for weariness, for tears, for hunger; His upon the cross and in the tomb; His to rise with . . .<sup>1</sup>

In Christianity, stuff matters, if you'll pardon the pun: the material world, including our material bodies, is the site of God's transfiguring work. In an Easter sermon to the newly baptised, St Augustine challenges those about to take Communion for the first time to see, to re-cognise, themselves in this light:

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<sup>1</sup> 'Sacraments', in C Gore (ed.), *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., (London: John Murray, 1890), 423, emphases added.

If you . . . are Christ's body . . . it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying "Amen" to what you are . . . [Therefore, says Augustine] be what you see; receive what you are.'<sup>2</sup>

In this eucharistic context, on the threshold of Lent, can we receive the Transfiguration story in this same light: not so much an account in which Christ's humanity is transfigured to show its true, that is its divine, colours; but rather, an opportunity to grasp – however fleetingly, or belatedly – that a material body might also be His body, and in that moment to see the true, that is the divine, colours of our own humanity, and of all created things, such that we can say with Peter, if only half-wittingly, "'tis good, Lord, to be here"; it is good to be part of that stuff in and through which God effects transfiguration: changing us, with all creatures, into the same image, from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18).

This last week saw another significant page on the calendar turn over: the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release from prison, and with it the start of the radical transformation of South Africa into the robust, if still troubled, democracy of universal suffrage it has become post-apartheid. It's quite a story of collective unveiling or re-cognition: of re-thinking, seeing afresh, the dignity and freight of the material bodies we inhabit, in birth and death, for suffering, and to rise with.

Far from serving as an 'escape hatch' from the risk and shame of our history, and the frailty of our flesh, the Transfiguration, like the account of the giving of the law to Moses, reminds us of just how deeply wedded God is to such stories – be they collective or individual – and to their associated material realities, and that really is divinely romantic – a perfect prelude to the Passion that seizes us in Lent.

If we take seriously the sacramental worldview that Paget commends to us from the heart of our own tradition, then we come to the sobering realisation that we are implicated in God's transfiguring, world-changing work – that the story of our lives, no less than of Mandela's in qualitative terms at least, is to be one of transformation, wherever the 'here' is that it is good for us to be.

Each year here at Christ Church, this vocation and ministry we are all engaged in by God's mercy, through baptism – that is, to be both sites and conduits of transformation – is embodied for us in a particular way by a person who is formally testing and courageously discerning what this might mean in terms of ordained ministry. Today we commission Jill Renison for that way of being: a person of prayerful openness to such transfiguring grace, who offers part of her journey to us, as together we seek to be what we see at this table, and – even harder perhaps – to learn to say 'Amen' to what it shows us we are: reaching out again and again to receive – to recognize – the mystery of our very selves: stuff that is charged with nothing less than the glory of God.

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<sup>2</sup>

Sermon 272, 408 CE, emphases added.