

The Transfiguration

Peter Haresnape, Feb 7 2016

Yesterday, heavy with sleep, I was at Convocation Hall on the University of Toronto campus for a ceremony. It was a large ceremony, as over 200 people came with their friends and family to receive their Canadian citizenship. I was there for my brother-in-law's partner.

He became a Canadian citizen. At a specific moment, which could be pinpointed in time, he became a Canadian citizen. His rights changed, his responsibilities changed, and his relationships. What does that look like, that moment of change? And when exactly was it? The official administering the Oath said it was when they took the oath. The civil servant directing the new Canadians to sign their papers said it was when they signed their papers.

Regardless of when exactly they became citizens, it looked a lot like a celebration.

There were smiles and handshakes, applause and lots of selfies. And throughout, there was a certain language of ritual and ceremony. There were grand symbols and gestures throughout, pointing to something grand taking place, which required flags, uniforms, medals, officials, handshakes, organ music and anthems.

Something very serious was happening. Individuals were making an agreement with a nation. The serious thing that was happening was invisible, though. The true power and significance of what was happening was not something that you could see in that moment. It will come when he crosses borders, or encounters police, or suffers illness.

So as a ceremony witnessing to an invisible change, it was all carefully choreographed, the different symbols and stages explained, and the new Canadians guided through the process. It was easy for me to understand.

Our text today on the Transfiguration is not as easy to understand for those disciples privileged to witness. As well as those named in the text, we are also disciples invited to witness, and we may share in their confusion and apprehension when we talk about the Transfiguration. It is a story of mystery and meaning, and it is hard not to be as startled as those first disciples.

For me as a reader, there are some initial questions. What genre is this? Sci-fi or fantasy? How exactly are Moses and Elijah present – as ghosts, spirits, time-travellers, metaphors? How can we approach this text?

As ever, the poets provide us with a place to start, addressing our boggled minds.

Transfiguration – MALCOLM GUILTE

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

Transfiguration is the 'changing of form'. We disciples glimpse the Spiritual Body, the very human Jesus glorified into... what? What he truly, verily, is. The very form and nature of the Human Being, the Son of Man.

For that one moment, a glimpse of truth. A glimpse of power, too, and Jesus is suddenly testified to by the voice from the cloud: "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!"

I think of those people being transformed into citizens by the power of an oath administered by a judge, and signed by clerks. The people did not change, but something changed about them.

Moses and Elijah are the great miracle workers. The Transfiguration links Jesus with them, makes his story part of that same story. They also represent perfectly and archetypally (archetypically?) the Law and the Prophets. Is Jesus continuing their work, or superceding them? Some have interpreted the voice saying 'This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him' as implying 'and stop listening to these other two'.

I do not believe that God was choosing Jesus to replace them. I think that it is more significant that Jesus is 'Chosen', and named as such, and this episode is connected with the purpose for which he has been Chosen.

Luke's gospel described the agenda of their meeting:

They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Was Jesus consulting with them, or perhaps they with Him? Were they explaining what needed to be done, or the coming consequences of what 'he was about to accomplish'? It suggests the the continuity of Jesus' mission with The Law and Prophets, and is echoed by the post-crucifixion Road to Emmaus episode, when the Risen Lord explains how what transpired at Jerusalem fits within the Law and the Prophets.

We don't know what they were saying, and inevitably, any speculation will be rooted in the individual theological perspective and specific belief about the cross.

Thankfully, our brother Peter also makes a guess, offering to construct shelters for each figure. Apparently this is the wrong guess or they do not take him up on the offer, which regrettably stops us from referring to the ministry of Jesus as a 'glorified camping trip'. Peter's proposal is contextually a reference to the Feast of Shelters, Sukkot, where the people go back into 'the wilderness' – another reference to Moses through the Exodus narrative. If Exodus is the ordeal of Moses that creates a new nation, Jesus is looking ahead to his ordeal. The word 'departure' is the same as 'exodus', meaning that Elijah and Moses were speaking with Jesus about His own Exodus, soon to be accomplished at Jerusalem. They were not there to accompany Him, but to prepare Him.

Given that Peter did not know what he was talking about, his offer is generally understood as an incorrect attempt to prolong the moment, and keep Moses and Elijah around. Who wouldn't? We tend to focus on the idea of retaining Moses and Elijah, but miss that Peter also wants to keep Jesus around, to delay or postpone His 'departure', and the intended journey to Jerusalem that is clearly such a bad idea.

The disciples were sleepy, and I think that is why I saw the link.

There is another time, on another mountain, when the disciples are sleepy as Jesus goes to pray. Again there is a mystical visitor, and again a bizarre physical manifestation in the body of Christ.

In the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Jesus faces the reality of His existence and the consequences of His mission. Agony. Passion. And He sweats blood, a condition that has been observed in people under extreme stress or torment.

Looking at these two passages side by side, we can see other similarities too. Both of them are close to instructions from Jesus to the disciples to not rely on possessions, and the

disciples arguing which is the greatest. It is as if Jesus is going over key lessons to ensure they are clear. And again he goes onto a mountain to pray, accompanied by his friends.

One difference here is that the disciples sleep through it. Jesus is strengthened by an angel but the disciples apparently fail to pray for the strength to resist temptation.

This temptation takes us squarely back to Peter. Jesus responds 'get thee behind me, Satan' to Peter when he rebukes Jesus for talking about his death. To me this is clearly connected to his offer to build the shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, to keep them on earth, and alive. It is also connected to his eventual denial of Jesus.

Peter is tempted, and he is also a tempter.

Peter is tempted to run away and deny Jesus, to save his own life.

Peter's temptation is for Christ to deny His full self, hide His divinity, flee His holy calling and survive.

Jesus could stay sequestered in the Law and the Prophets and not engage in his own necessary, timely, creative and unique work

Jesus could choose to not face death. That is the temptation.

Strike me down and I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine

By the end of this, Jesus is speaking and the crowd come for him, led by Judas. There is no more time to go over his instructions. It is time to face a second, more brutal revelation of who he is as the Son of God, as a human being, as the King of Israel. This transfiguration is not glorious, but mocking and cruel. Elijah does not come for him even though some of the crowd hope that he will (in Mark and Matthew). Instead of Moses and Elijah by his side, two criminals are crucified.

It is the mystery of transfiguration that Jesus can be all these things. That a vision of who he is fully can be robed in dazzling white with the company of the heroes of the faith, and just as fully it can be him stripped and scourged and condemned with criminals.

The mystery is not 'did Moses and Elijah time travel, or were they ghosts?' Neither is the mystery 'why was it wrong for Peter to offer shelters?'

How can we see, and hold, and believe the Glory of God while also knowing the cruelty, treachery and sin of the world? How can Jesus all-powerful also suffer like the least of us?

Embracing that mystery is a task of the Christian faith. What that says about God, what it requires of us. What it means for worship. Which Jesus is worthy of praise, and why?

Hold the mystery with your sisters and brothers. May God bless us.