

BUT WHAT EXACTLY HAS CHANGED?

Exodus 24 12-18

2 Peter 1 16-21

Matthew 17. 1-9

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In the Harry Potter books, you may remember that the students at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have to take a course in ‘Transfiguration’. There they learn how to change teacups into rats, or flowers into candles. And for most of us those are good examples, because when we think of ‘transfiguration’, we define it as a *change of state* from one thing into something quite different. The Greek word used in Matthew 17 is the word from which we derive the English word ‘metamorphosis’; and that word also conjures up images of caterpillars turning into butterflies or of a Franz Kafka character waking up one day only to discover he had turned into a giant beetle.

But none of those associations seems quite apt to describe whatever it was that happened to our Lord in Matthew 17. We don’t want to say (do we?) that Jesus changed from *one kind of being* into a *completely different type*. For the better part of two millennia, the Church has struggled to hold in tension the idea that Christ was one person with two natures (fully human and fully divine); and that those two natures co-existed in our Lord without confusion, without mixture, without one altering the other, and so on.¹ So we can’t theologically countenance the idea that Jesus could switch between being either human or divine, as though he had not been both at the same time all along.

¹ The Athanasian Creed provides an exceedingly thorough briefing on this subject.

To avoid this, we could say that what happened on the mountaintop is that the divine nature rose to prominence in Jesus in a way that had not generally been the case throughout his earthly existence up to that point. Or we could say that for a few brief moments, the Father showed the disciples what Christ (as the Son of God) had always looked like before he emptied or stripped himself of certain ordinary divine traits so as to become incarnately human.² Either way or both ways, however, it was not that our Lord became something he generally speaking was not; but more the case that something that was a part of who he had been all along was displayed in a different way.

This may be important to remember; because when Jesus said things like ‘If you have seen me, you have seen the Father’,³ he didn’t mean just this one incident of blazing glory. He meant that his divinity had been on display every day of his life. Divinity was on display when he spoke kindly to ostracised women and outcast lepers. Divinity was on display when Christ wept over a dead friend; and divinity was on display when he smiled gently at a misguided yet earnest rich young ruler.

In other words, we never dare say of Matthew 17 that this was one time when we could see Jesus as divine in addition to being also human. After all, this passage is given to us on the final Sunday before the start of Lent; and we want to be clear all through the Lenten Season that the glory of the Father and the fullness of the Godhead were on display even when a crown of thorns was pressed into the flesh of Christ’s scalp, and even when that same man was hoisted up on a spit of wood like a grim scarecrow on top of a garbage heap.

When Peter made his impetuous suggestion that they capture the moment forever by building some dwellings or shelters up there on the mountaintop, the foolishness

² Think of it as a temporary reversal of the *kenosis* (Christ’s self-emptying in the Incarnation) that is described in Philippians 2.

³ Cf. Jn 14. 9.

of his suggestion is not what we normally think it is; namely, that you just can't just reach out and put divine incandescence in a bottle, as though you were doing no more than capturing a firefly in a glass jar. No, the true folly of Peter's suggestion stems from the fact that he didn't need shelters to capture what was going on up there on the mountain, because *that same reality* had been with him and the other disciples from the very first day they met our Lord. When Peter suggested that they build dwellings, tabernacles or tents (in the Greek, σκηνάς or skēnas) for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, he used the same root word that St John uses in the first chapter of his gospel, when he writes that Christ came and 'dwelt' (ἐσκήνωσεν or eskēnōsen) in our midst.⁴ The 'dwelling' that Peter was looking for had been with him in our Lord's fleshly tent all along.

When the spectacle was over, verse 8 tells us that the disciples looked up and 'saw no one except (our Lord) himself alone.' But had anything really changed? Was Jesus any less glorious then than he had been a few moments earlier? And what about when Christ would soon get to that point on the cross, when he would become, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'as one from whom others hide their faces'?⁵ Was he any less glorious there at Calvary than in those few moments of obvious shining on the mountaintop?

It is ironic that this moment of Transfiguration always strikes us as being all about what can be *seen*; and yet when God's voice thunders from heaven, what he says is that the disciples must *listen* to his Son, the Beloved! Apparently, if they *listen to what our Lord says*, they will discover windows on glory they had never before suspected were there.⁶

⁴ Cf Jn 1. 14.

⁵ Cf. Is 53. 3.

⁶ In Deut 18. 15 God (through Moses) predicts that he will one day raise up a prophet like Moses and that when that one comes, the people will have to *listen to him*. This text is a key text to understand the role of the Prophet in ancient Israel but also as a key text that points forward to the ultimate Prophet, Jesus Christ.

Perhaps it is no different today. Our modern time is as enamoured of outward glitz and glitter and eye-popping spectacles as any era has ever been. The media is drawn to the spectacular, the superstars, the headline-grabbers. But *true glory* lurks in unexpected places and in generally humble wrappings. In fact, it lurks in every Christian believer, in every one of us about whom Jesus once prayed, when he asked to be one with us, even as he and his Father are one.

It is when we listen to the Word of Christ (as it is read, heard and preached) that we start to see the glory we too often miss. Don't you find it a bit curious that our Lord tells the disciples to tell no one about the vision of the Transfiguration until after he had been raised from the dead? Because once Jesus was raised from the dead, he didn't stick around for very long. By the time the disciples were free to tell people about this, they weren't able to point to Christ in physical form. He had ascended to heaven by then; and so all that was left was words and witness: things to which people could *listen*.

I am sure that deep down, all of us would in a way like to join Peter and capture the more obvious features of glory that were revealed to him and the other disciples that day. What we really are left to do, however, is to see the glory that surrounds us always whenever we hear and repeat the Word of Life⁷ that is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A key job of the Prophet in Israel was to mediate the covenant by applying Torah, the Law, to the people. Sometimes that application was in a call to return to God's covenant intentions for his people and often that call came in the form of rebuke and the cry of repentance to a stiff-necked and disobedient people.

This is in part why Moses (Law) and Elijah (Prophet) appear with our Lord even as he in his own being fulfils the Law and the Prophets perfectly, not so much applying the Law to the people as fulfilling its very purpose through his own life and sacrificial death.

⁷ Cf Phil 2. 16.