

February 27 2022: Quinquagesima

Luke 9: 28-36

‘’ - *Michael Brown*

Opening Hymn

NEH 408: 'Love Divine, all loves excelling'

1. Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heav'n, to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love thou art.
Visit us with thy salvation;
Enter ev'ry trembling heart.

3. Finish, then, thy new creation;
true and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.

Words: Charles Wesley (1707-88). Tune: Blaenwern

Lent Already!

Well nearly. Today is Quinquagesima, modern name 'The Sunday Next before Lent'. So this Wednesday will be Ash Wednesday when Lent really does begin. And today's Gospel Reading is Luke's account of that mysterious event the Transfiguration of Jesus. I'm going to quote three verses and concentrate on one of them:

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Today's Sermon Theme: What has the Transfiguration to do with Lent?

Here is one answer in a hymn. Possibly not our idea of what a hymn looks like. It comes from Mattins for the Feast of the Transfiguration as used in the Orthodox Church. It ought to be written out in columns as in our hymn books.

“On the mountain, you were transfigured, and as far as they could your disciples, Christ our God, saw your glory; so that when they saw you crucified, they might understand you suffered of your own free will, and might proclaim to the world that you are indeed the Father’s reflection.” (Translated by Hugh Wybrew, ©2000 SVS Press)

[‘Orthodox’ with a capital ‘O’ refers to that large family of churches which includes the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Syriac Orthodox which is one of the oldest churches. Persecution and emigration have resulted in members of these churches nowadays being found world wide.]

Where to Begin?

This Orthodox hymn reminds us of the significance of something that is easy to miss: ‘*you were transfigured*’. Jesus didn’t take the initiative as when he was teaching and healing. God transfigured Jesus in a moment of glory that pointed both to the end of his story and strengthened him for what was yet to happen.

Is the Transfiguration A Unique Event?

Yes and No. Yes, in the case of Jesus who was transfigured immediately and directly by an act of God. No, as in the many documented instances of saints and mystics who led extremely deep prayer lives. And also No in the similar instances of changes in the appearance of e.g., composers when creative inspiration comes upon them.

Can ‘Ordinary’ Christians be Transfigured?

No apologies for the reminder that there are no ‘ordinary’ Christians, only God’s saints. *But*, many Christians do feel just ordinary, not at all special. No marvellous visions, no inspired thoughts, just the humdrum round of apparently ordinary living - but that is exactly where to start. The idea that these tasks can ‘*bring us daily nearer God*’ (John Keble from ‘*New Every Morning is the Love*’, NEH 238) may seem old fashioned beyond belief but what is the alternative? Are we to take it upon ourselves to say that our daily existence is of no interest to God? Surely that would completely contradict the gospel message?

The Heart of Today’s Reading ...

...is in the verse underlined and in two words: ‘*his departure*’. Usually translations of the New Testament will aim to give us the meaning of a Greek word in one or two English words. In this instance, we’d be helped by saying ‘*his exodus*’. That is the actual Greek word. Luke here shows his skill as a writer. In just one word he gives an echo of the journey of the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land, while pointing to the return journey from earth to heaven which Jesus is about to make.

And yet there is more. ‘Exodus’ is also used as a euphemism for ‘death’. The double meaning of ‘journey’ and ‘death’ would not be lost on the original hearers and readers of this gospel. They would find in this apparently mysterious story a luminous account of the whole life of Jesus, of why he came into our world, how he accomplished his mission from his Father, and how his journey enabled him to bestow the Spirit on his followers.

Going Round in Circles

Each time we begin a new liturgical season, whether it's Christmas, Epiphany or Lent, we may get that feeling of 'here we go again, round and round in circles'. Well we are going round and round but not in circles, and certainly not in ever decreasing circles. We are going round and round in spirals rising ever closer to Heaven as we are called by Christ. Journeying ever onward, even through Lent, with the Risen Lord we are being slowly transfigured '*by love that moves the sun and other stars*' (the Italian poet Dante.)

All Ready for Lent?

*Look, Father, look on his anointed face,
And only look on us as found in him'* (NEH 273)

Let us pray that: We may be transfigured *by* this Lenten season.

And let us pray that: We may be transfigured *during* this Lenten season.

To finish: a hymn that both speaks of transfiguration and looks towards Lent.

'Transfigured Christ, None Comprehends'

1 Transfigured Christ, none comprehends Your majesty, whose splendour stuns All waking souls; whose light transcends The brightness of a thousand suns!	6 Majestic Christ, God's well-loved Son, If we must share your grief and loss, Transfigure us, when all is done, With glory shining from your cross.
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Words: Alan Gaunt, 1991. ©Alan Gaunt. Tune, e.g., 'O Worship the King, All Glorious above'