

Bedazzled

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Transfiguration, Last Sunday of Epiphany Year A 19th February 2023
Exodus 24.12-18, Psalm 2, 2 Peter 1.16-21, Matthew 17.1-9

*Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen*

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, the season of revelation that began with the bright star guiding the three wise ones to the Christ child, and now comes to a conclusion with the adult Jesus on a high mountain, transfigured before three of his disciples - his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white.

Transfiguration can be marked at various times in the year, but we are choosing this moment on the cusp of Epiphany and Lent – on the cusp of this season of light and the coming season of darkness, as we anticipate Shrove Tuesday – a day of penitence, and Ash Wednesday, a day of coming to grips with our mortality.

We are on the cusp of this season of revelation, and the coming season of questioning.

This season of birth, and the season of preparing for death.

This season of glimpsing holy mysteries, and the season of unknowing.

This season of gathering together, of commissioning and initiation, and the season of private reflection.

This season of blessing, and the season of confession.

This season of healing, and the season of laying bare our wounds.

This season of freedom in choosing to love and reconcile outside the judgment of the law - and the season of spiritual discipline.

And at the end of Lent we will once more be on a cusp – between the darkness of the tomb and the light of Easter dawn.

Sometimes, mysteriously, our lives seem to mirror the movements of the church seasons – but whether they happen to or not, each season has lessons for the soul and keys to unlock the heart. So today I am focused on the response of Peter who stands in for us - as one of the ever stumbling disciples. Amazed by this vision of Jesus transfigured by light, alongside the great prophets Moses and Elijah, he has the bright idea of making three dwellings on the mountain top – perhaps to prolong or fix this wonderful moment in time. But God seems rather impatient with this piece of church building and mission planning, interrupting him “while he was still speaking” with the voice from a bright cloud – as if to say ‘No, don’t start all that, just listen - listen to the living Word, to my Son the Beloved.’ But the disciples were so overcome by this voice and the brightness that surrounds them – from the cloud, from the face and even the clothes of Jesus that they “fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.”

This echoes the story of Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the law from a frankly terrifying God who had earlier manifested in thunder, lightning, a loud trumpet blast, smoke, and fire with the whole mountain trembling violently. (Exodus 19:16-19) Our reading describes the sixth of eight ascents made by Moses – this lasts 40 days and 40 nights. *Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel (24.17)* On descending for the eighth time, Moses’ face was so radiant with God’s awesome presence that his people were afraid to look upon it - and so it was covered with a veil.

This is turned about in the transfiguration of Jesus. His time on the mountain top is brief –his defining 40 days and 40 nights are spent on the plain - in the trial of the wilderness. He does not cover his face, rather he actually touches the overwhelmed disciples and bids them ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ So, let us allow ourselves to be dazzled, for the veil that divides the divine from humanity is removed in Christ – and when we look up we shall see the simple yet astonishing reality of him. In this moment Christ is revealed as the meeting place of heaven earth, of the material and the eternal – a meeting place but also a launching place. It is not the time for building dwelling places – it is not an end point but a beginning – we are to follow him down, back to the fray of life below. But why does Jesus say to tell no-one? One view is that he has work to do, more teaching, more healing, before he draws the sort of attention that will lead to his arrest and death. And it is to this difficult work that the disciples are also called, but guided, inspired, and enlightened by what they have seen. As Peter tells us:

We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Peter 1. 18-19)

At the Easter dawn service we light the paschal candle and from it light one another's little candles with the words 'the light of Christ,' our faces lit up in the darkness. Revd. Sally does a similar thing at Christmas from the advent candle. This sharing and spreading of the light is core to our faith and the most beautiful thing. I am a firm believer in sacraments like this being more than symbolic – we are *actually* sharing the love of Christ in every candle lighting. Some years ago, our Paschal Candle was decorated with blue sky and golden wheat – and when the year was up we continued to light it at Twilight Meditations – then since the Russian invasion we have lit it at every service to remember the people of Ukraine – the wheat-bowl of Europe. It has burned lower and lower and who knows if the war will end before the candle runs out. But from the remains of this we can light a new candle, for in Christ we have a light that that the darkness will not overcome.

War is but one trouble in our world – there are so many threats to people, to all the creatures and plants, and to the planet itself. Ancient traditions of wisdom are tossed aside and conspiracy theories and ignorance abound. And in our personal lives, those closest to us can hurt and challenge us, we can even be upset at ourselves. It would be remarkable if we did not feel at least a little overwhelmed by all this.

It is especially important then, that we do not turn from the light that will sustain us and give us the resources to face these difficulties. Yet it sometimes seems as if the world puts up with all this darkness, but shuns the light of hope, truth, reason, compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. How strange that we should be overcome and frightened by the light. Jesus is transfigured in light and the light of Christ can transfigure us, if we are not afraid of it – if we look up and respond to his touch and his call – if we not only gaze upon but absorb and live in this beautiful light. Then we ourselves can be as candles in the darkness – holders and spreaders of the Christ's enlivening love. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul appeals to them, and to us: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Romans 12.2)

And to the Corinthians, and to us, he writes: *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.* (2 Corinthians 3.17-18)

Our word transfigure, is translated from the Greek *metamorphoō* the same root from which we have the English word metamorphosis – “to change form in keeping with inner reality.”ⁱ *...in keeping with inner reality* – this is not a weird supernatural process – but so very natural – the re/emergence of what has always been there waiting. We can all probably remember that one of our first nature lessons was the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly - a mysterious process that takes place in the secret chamber of the cocoon. So going into the darkness of Lent need not be all about navigating trouble and difficulty – the darkness is also a place of quiet formation and growth. In *The Night*, the 17th century poet Henry Vaughan wrote:

*There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness.*

How wonderful think of darkness being as dazzling as light.

You might want to see what thoughts and images arise for you if you consider the metamorphosis of Jesus. And then consider the great metamorphosis that would take place if we were all changed forever in the sharing of that transforming light to realise our best selves. As we linger in the light of Transfiguration before entering the darkness of Lent – be it a difficult darkness or a nurturing darkness – or perhaps both at once - what thoughts and images arise if you consider your own metamorphosis? What inner reality will you encounter in the dazzling darkness, and how will you emerge to dazzle and amaze the rest of us? Are you afraid to change, or do you long to dry off your new wings in the bright sun and take flight?

May God, and our fellow travellers, be with us through every transformation and emergence, Amen.

ⁱ HELPS Word-studies, 3339, 3445, <https://www.biblehub.com/greek/3339.htm>