

Mark 9.2-9

Many of you, will, I'm sure, have seen the news item about the hapless Rod Ponton, a Texas lawyer, who was appearing in a virtual court hearing, via Zoom. On joining the meeting he suddenly found that his picture had been changed to one of a white kitten. "I'm here live", he said, as he frantically tried to remove the filter, "I'm not a cat!"

Mr Ponton had become the unwilling object of a transfiguration. This is because a transfiguration means a change in outward appearance, rather than in substance, or essence. This is the difference between transfiguration and transformation. Mr Ponton remained a human lawyer, as he had always been, despite appearances. Had he really turned into a cat, that would have been a transformation, and would presumably have caused even more of a stir on social media (never mind the legal implications for the court case).

A transfiguration may or may not be revelatory. There has been a lot on the news lately about the various missions to Mars now taking place, and it made me think about the first time we saw the earth from space, particularly the famous 'blue marble' image taken by the Apollo 17 astronauts. We saw our planet as we had never seen it before. Nothing had changed, we already knew where the oceans were, the land masses, the weather systems. But seeing that beautiful blue and white sphere, hanging in the darkness of space, made us realise how small it was, how alone we were, and brought home to us how we are all travelling together on our spaceship Earth toward our shared destiny.

Today we read the strange, almost spine-tingling, story of how Jesus takes three disciples: Peter, James and John, to a mountaintop, where they experience a life-changing vision, or revelation. They see Jesus as they have never seen him before; they see his glory.

In Mark's Gospel, the Transfiguration story is directly preceded by a conversation about Jesus' identity. When Jesus asks who others think he is, the disciples answer, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets" (Mark 8:28). Jesus responds with a follow-up question: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:29). This means that when Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up on the mountain, all have very recently heard Peter's confession. The question of Jesus' identity should be fresh in their minds, something they are still wondering about.

What happens on the mountain is a unique kind of miracle. Jesus' face and clothes become bright and shining – a description reminiscent of Moses' face in Exodus 34:29-35, when he comes down from the mountain after his encounter with God. Suddenly, the three disciples see Moses and Elijah (who represent the Law and the Prophets) talking with Jesus. The disciples are confused and terrified. Then a cloud envelops them, and a voice is heard saying

“This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!” It is the same Cloud that stood at the door of Moses' tent to mark the Presence of God (*Shekinah*). The Cloud lifts, and Jesus is left alone.

It is an amazing story, but what might it mean for us, living our everyday lives in the world? I think that to answer this we need to read on, to see what happens immediately after this revelatory experience. First of all Jesus and the three disciples discover that a crowd has gathered, and the other disciples are having an argument with some scribes. So back to real life! Then a man from the crowd calls out to Jesus, begging him to heal his son, who is suffering from convulsions. We would probably say it was some form of epilepsy, but not only is he suffering the debilitating effects of the seizures, he was considered to be possessed by a demon, and he and his family would have been outcasts from society. Jesus however hears the father's cry for help and heals the boy.

I don't think it is accidental that Mark tells us that this happened immediately after the Transfiguration, as soon as Jesus came down from the mountain. It is as though the glory that the disciples saw on the mountain, shining from the transfigured Christ, is now shining out into the world, transforming and healing the lives of God's suffering children.

I think we are only too aware of that need for healing. In the past year we have watched as more and more people suffer the effects of the Covid pandemic, through sickness, bereavement and economic hardship. I just read that the Children's Society (that we support with our Christingle appeal) estimates that the number of children living in poverty in the UK will reach five million this year. So many people calling out for help. We know that the Earth needs healing; that our beautiful blue and white planet, seen close up, is in deep trouble: the ice caps melting, sea levels rising, species being lost, that this year may be our last chance to prevent disastrous climate change. There are many dark places in our world where the light needs to shine.

When I lived in Sarajevo I used to sing in an Orthodox Church choir, and sometimes we sang in the Preobraženska crkva: the Church of the Transfiguration. Each year on the feast of the Transfiguration the church was packed, and after the service there was a big party outside with lots of food and drink! The transfiguration is very important in the Orthodox churches, because it ties in with a strand in their theology called 'theosis', the process by which a person can enter into a closer union with God, and become more like God. However theosis is not an expansion of the ego; it is the reverse, an emptying of the self so that our true nature can be seen, made in God's image and reflecting God's glory. Certainly the Transfiguration points us toward the possibility of transformation, of ourselves, and of the world. We could define transfiguration as the practice of allowing the light of God's love to shine through us.

I do not think it is a coincidence that Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all experienced God on a mountaintop. We need those moments, alone or with others, away from the everyday world, to pray and meditate, and gather together to worship. All of these acts are ways of practicing transfiguration. They are ways of gently letting go of our ego, the masks we wear (or perhaps our Zoom filters!), our busyness, and our distractions. These practices of prayer, presence, and worship, open us from our isolation to connect us to God and to one another. We each reflect different aspects of the image of God, and practicing transfiguration allows God's image to shine more brilliantly through us.

However, an experience of transfiguration is not an escape from real life. Just as Moses had to go back down the mountain to continue wandering in the wilderness, Jesus — after the mountaintop Transfiguration — still had to turn his face toward Jerusalem. We need to come down the mountain, and allow the light we have seen, the light of Christ, to shine through us, into the world.