

Transfiguration

Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14, 2 Peter 1:16-19

Luke 9:28-36

6th August 2023

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Does Jesus change?

He's invited three of his disciples, Peter, John, and James up the mountain to join him as he prays. They go with him, retreating from the busyness of the crowds so that they may peacefully spend time in prayer. Now Jesus had relatively often retreated to deserted places and mountains in order to pray, for wherever he went the crowds grew in number and they would seek him out. Whenever he was found, he would welcome them, but there remains a sense that it was one of Jesus' priorities to regularly spend time in solitude for prayer.

Throughout Luke's Gospel we see him drawing a handful of people closer to him in prayer; first he's alone (L4:32), then there's a crowd of disciples, which were distinct from the crowd at large (L6:13), from which he then calls

the twelve Apostles who alone are near him in Luke 9:18 when Jesus asks "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Having responded with different rumours they are asked their own opinion, to which Peter replies: "The Messiah of God."

It's a pivotal moment in the Gospel narratives, with Matthew, Mark and Luke all using the events up until this point to point towards this conclusion, demonstrating Jesus' power and authority over the sick, the demonic, and even over nature itself through the miraculous catch of fish, the feeding of the five thousand and the calming of the Storm.

While Jesus had been teaching and preaching about the kingdom of Heaven and the need for repentance before this point, following Peter's inspired insight and confession of his identity Jesus' teaching takes on a more prophetic tone; '*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*' (L9:22).

This prophetic intensity is combined in Luke with a strict compulsion to secrecy. The knowledge being shared is

part of an unfolding mission, the purpose of which is to be proclaimed more broadly only once its success has been achieved.

It's at this point that Jesus invites our trio to accompany him as he heads up the mountain to pray.

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. (L9:29).

Suddenly the three of them see Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah, appearing in glory and speaking about his departure which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Luke presents Peter as being unsure of what to do, stumbling over his words and saying the first thing which came to mind - "Lord, may we make three dwellings, one for each of you." While he speaks a cloud overshadows them and they were terrified as they entered it before hearing a voice saying: "This is my Son, my chosen; Listen to him!"

I suspect that for Peter, John, and James the unexpected unknown of what was happening contributed significantly to the sensation of alarm, yet looking back on it it was glorious - for Peter writes of *that Majestic*

Glory which spoke, saying: *This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*' (2P1:17). This reminds me of the sensation one feels when on a high ropes course where you jump off a platform into a big swing or down a zipline. The initial sensation is of tension in your stomach and the rush of adrenaline, but having jumped the same sensation of fear becomes exhilaration and your perspective moves from anxiety to celebration.

I wonder if something similar happened here for those disciples, if the terror of the moment was transformed into an awe-filled recollection of the significance of what they witnessed?

Yet my question remains: Did Jesus Change?

On the one hand it is undoubtedly clear that there was a change. The underlying Greek carries a vividness which is not well replicated in our English bibles; 'the fashion of his countenance was another thing from what it had been... and his clothing was bright like lightning, so that he seemed to be arrayed all with light, or to have covered himself with light as with a garment.'¹

¹ Matthew Henry, on L9:29.

This is an image reminiscent of Psalm 104:

Praise the Lord, O my soul : O Lord my God, thou art become exceeding glorious; thou art clothed with Majesty and honour.

Thou deckest thyself with light as it were with a garment : and spreaded out the heavens like a curtain. (Ps 104:1-2)

Did Jesus change? Of course he did!

Or at least, the disciples have now seen him in a different light - pardon the pun - than they had before.

The moment passes and Jesus seems to be “back to normal” and yet the disciples were never to be the same again for having experienced the power and majestic glory they encountered on the mountain. This much is clear for Peter, who writes with a clear sense that his own impending martyrdom is not far off, and yet the power of this experience continues to compel and convince him of the Gospel which he preaches; *“We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was*

conveyed to him by the majestic glory. 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.” (2P1:16-19a)

And yet... I cannot help but ask again, Did Jesus Change?

We believe that Jesus is the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary. We believe that he is truly God and truly human. We hold these two realities together in Jesus and try as we might we find it hard not to accidentally think of him more in either his humanity or his divinity; falling into the trap of thinking that he does his miracles as God and yet dies as a human.

Likewise, we can easily be inclined to think that in this moment on the mountain we see a glimpse of Jesus’ “true” nature as a being of glory who is hidden from our view by being clothed in flesh. This is another theological misstep, which would place our feet onto docetic ground - the heresy that Jesus was not truly human but only appeared to be human as if God were using a human mannequin-like puppet to act within the world via some kind of spiritual remote control. If this is the case then our salvation has not been won for us for God has not

pledged his love for us within his own nature and being.

The opposite error is also to be avoided, to think that in this moment (or indeed at any other) the human Jesus somehow attains divinity and thus transcends the human experience to become God. If this were the case then salvation becomes a purely human effort, and we all should likewise achieve this brighter than lightning appearance and the truth of holiness becomes a reality beyond our grasp or comprehension.

No, the more helpful way of viewing the transfiguration of Christ is by remembering that this scene has only occurred following Peter's confession that Christ is the Messiah, and Jesus' prophecy that the son of man must suffer, die and be raised again.

In this context the events on the mountain serve as confirmation of revelation; and a reminder that no matter how much we think we can truly say about the glory of God, God is always greater than we can comprehend. Yet, like the disciples, no matter how confused and awestruck we might be, we can and do encounter the reality of God.

This revelation of Jesus' closeness with God the Father, and his relationship with Moses and Elijah, the old testament law and prophets, shows us that the human Jesus born of Mary is the one who has continuity with the revelation of God throughout the Old Testament; especially that of God in Daniel 7 where Daniel sees '*one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the ancient one and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.*' (D7:13-14).

This has continuity with Peter's words, and also with Paul's when he writes:

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

9 *Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Ph2:6-11)*

This sense of continuity is so key because it's not simply a thematic consistency but a spiritual reality, and not even a spiritual reality but is simply...: reality; indeed perhaps the most real thing, the most real person, in all of existence and beyond it. For in Christ Jesus, by the power of his death and resurrection, we discover that the fallen creation is fundamentally redefined and reorientated such that life and being itself takes its form and meaning from Jesus Christ himself who lives and breathes, and evermore intercedes for us, sinners though we be.

I am reminded of the vision of Isaiah 6 where Isaiah writes: *I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; ... And one called to another and said:*

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'* (I6:1-3)

A vision which is glimpsed again hundreds of years later by John, who writes in Revelation:

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, Day and night without ceasing they sing,

*'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.'* (Rv4:6-8)

A reminder to us that although history continues to unfold with the fullness of human life and drama, with the passage of seasons and years, the worship of God is eternally being sung - as it ever has been, as it ever shall be, as it even is this very morning.

And so I ask, did Jesus change?

Or do we find ourselves on this feast of the transfiguration sharing in the revelation to the disciples that the fullness of God in Christ Jesus is far greater than we might have anticipated?

Greater all the more for not being a moment which happened once upon a mountain with three disciples but is the eternally present revelation of Christ who even now lives and reigns as our Lord and saviour? A Lord beyond all we can imagine or expect yet who ensures that we can encounter and comprehend him nevertheless?

For this is what happens when we gather together away from the chaos and drama of the world by coming into this Church building and consciously reminding ourselves of the continuity of our faith with those who have worshipped before us through the centuries here in this very place as we, like they, are invited and so dare to enter the presence of God and to taste in the bread and wine the promises of Christ's own body and blood, by which our souls and bodies are preserved unto everlasting life.

Amen.