



Sunday next before Lent  
6 March 2011

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## Transfiguration

A sermon by Revd Nicholas Holtam

**Readings: 2 Peter 1.16-end; Matthew 17.1-9**

“Six days later”. Six days after what? After Jesus had come to Caesarea Philippi and asked his disciples who people say the Son of Man is? They said some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and others Jeremiah: all prophets. “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. It is a great moment of revelation when what was being given by God was acknowledged out loud by a human being. Just as Peter names who Jesus is, so Jesus says that Peter is the rock on whom he will build his church.

Oddly Jesus, “Sternly ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah” as if things are not yet ripe, but on that moment the Gospel turns and, “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Peter stepped straight in: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Then Jesus told his disciples,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

*Matthew 16.24-28*

You can see why we get the passage that follows as our Gospel reading on the Sunday before Lent, when the followers of Jesus Christ today will consciously turn first to the desert and then to the cross in the Church’s annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up to a high mountain by themselves.” These three became an inner core of disciples. They were taken up high on this holy mountain and they will be there with Jesus in Jerusalem at the desolation on the Mount of Olives. They saw the glory of the Lord who is joined with Moses and Elijah showing the support of the Jewish Law and Prophets in identifying Jesus as the Messiah. This is a life-giving tradition of which Jesus is the glorious fulfillment. “This is my son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The Transfiguration is central to the Gospels. There is an account of it in each of the first three Gospels – Mathew, Mark and Luke. John does not tell this story but his whole Gospel shows Christ’s glory:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

*John 1. 14*

The glory of God seen in Jesus reveals who Jesus is and that we share his nature through the glory of our baptism, through the glory of the cross, and through the glory of Easter and the resurrection. Every religion contains an account of what it is to be human and in the transfiguration Jesus' humanity is divine.

We have common experience of what it is to be transformed and transfigured.

In the presence of Nelson Mandela the world stands taller.

On her wedding day, every bride looks 'radiant', her beauty shining because she is well loved.

John Subbiah, at his retirement 'do' on Friday looked transfigured as he was upheld and thanked by his colleagues at the Drug and Substance Misuse clinic where he has worked for the last 12 years.

In a person of great holiness, we often see something like a light shining within them, their face transfigured in such a way that they enlighten us.

The great performance of sublime music can be "out of this world".

This is not just an individual experience. We feel it at moments when society acts well and we do something together. There is a direction written in Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* which says, "For one moment must every instrument exert its fullest force." Great music or liturgy raises us up, individually and together. There will have been moments for each of us when we have felt ourselves to be part of something bigger, greater, nobler than we can imagine by ourselves and we are transfigured in such a way as gives us hope for ever. "For one moment must every instrument exert its fullest force."

About the *Dream* Elgar wrote:

I imagined Gerontius to be a man like us... a sinner... Therefore I have not filled his part with Church-tunes and rubbish, but a good, healthy, full-bloodied romantic, remembered worldliness."

But worldliness needs to be redeemed because we live on a knife-edge, as we can feel at the moment in relation to our economy, or events in North Africa and the Middle East, or the widening gap between rich and poor, or the imminence of environmental catastrophe. It is so easy to disfigure what we have been given.

As if as a parable, the Feast of the Transfiguration in the Church's year is on 6th August. This started in the Eastern Church as a local and unofficial festival. In the West its general observance dates from Pope Callistus III's order of its universal celebration to commemorate the victory over the Turks at Belgrade on 6th August 1456. We might not be so sure now that the relief and celebration felt then at the destruction of the infidel was a transfiguring moment in the greatness of Christianity. In modern times the 6<sup>th</sup> August is the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. A nuclear bomb 2,000 times more powerful than any weapon made before, created a mushroom cloud and intense light, the images of the transfiguration. In the 1980's, when I was doing research on the Church's attitude to nuclear weapons, my father told me how guilty he still felt that his initial response to that terrible destruction was relief. In the summer of 1945 he had survived the war in North Africa and Western Europe. He could not face embarking for the Far East which he thought he would not survive and thanked God he did not have to go. It wasn't until John Hearsy's article in *The New Yorker* a year later that the world began to grasp the horrifying impact of the atomic bomb: of soldiers' melted eyeballs, citizens instantly vaporized, leaving only their shadows etched onto walls and of 140,000 people dying as a consequence. This is the violence of the world depicted in the cross that will hang here in Passiontide, the last two weeks of Lent, 'Victim No Resurrection'.

The First letter of Peter was addressed to the newly baptised: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, called out of darkness into his marvellous light". It was a sort of 'Alpha Course' and is followed in our New Testament by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter of Peter from

which we read today and which is a Beta Course encouraging us to interpret scripture carefully, moved by the Holy Spirit in response to the glory of Jesus Christ.

Knowing that our human nature has such glorious potential lifts our sights and our hopes.

A person asked for spiritual direction from a holy person. “I feel as though I have in myself two people. One is a lamb, gentle and humble, at one with all creation. The other is a wolf, greedy and predatory, seeking to devour whatever gets in its way. I am afraid of the battle between these two parts of myself. Which of them will win?” The spiritual guide replied, “The one that will win is the one you feed.”