

THE TRANSFIGURATION ACCORDING TO WILLIAM BLAKE

SERMON St James King Street, 26 February, 2017, Feast of the Transfiguration

TEXTS: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Oh my God! Or, as they say in the world of tweets, OMG! God reduced to an acronym. A set of letters. Not like ancient Jewish practice which rendered God's name as the letters YHWH because Yahweh was too holy to say. OMG is kicked around like a pebble in a playground. Cleansed, colourless, God-free.

Today's gospel passage about the Transfiguration of Jesus is anything but colourless. It's full of divine identity. It's vision and mystery, shrouded by the power and might of divinity, a god who deals in smoke and fire and thunder and burning bushes¹, who walks in the garden in the cool of the evening breeze,² who whispers gently in soft silences,³ who lies in straw as a helpless baby among the animals in a stable. Who pleads, *'O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?'*⁴ God pleading with humankind who would rub out their god to nothing but an acronym less than themselves.

How do we conjure up awe and wonder in a world where God has been so reduced? Let me begin our search for answers, awe and wonder with lines from a poem called 'Auguries of Innocence' by William Blake:

**Some are Born to sweet delight
Some are Born to Endless Night
We are led to Believe a Lie
When we see not Thro the Eye
Which was Born in a Night to perish in a Night
When the Soul Slept in Beams of Light
God Appears & God is Light
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night
But does a Human Form Display
To those who Dwell in Realms of day⁵**

¹ Exodus 3:2-3

² Genesis 3:8

³ 1 Kings 19: 12-13

⁴ Micha 6:3

⁵ William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence'

Blake's images fit the Transfiguration so well with its images of day and night, light and dark. Awe. Wonder. They fit the life of the man, Jesus. Born in the night. Lived to shine God's light on the ordinariness of living. Died on a Roman cross and, says John's gospel, *it was night*.⁶

So what might have been going on that day when *Jesus took ... Peter and James and his brother John ... up a high mountain, by themselves*. They saw him transformed. His robes dazzling. His face shining like the sun⁷ just as Moses' face had shone after he met God on Mount Sinai?⁸ Jesus' flesh and blood were "soaked through", as Rowan Williams so wonderfully put it, "with that glory and brightness which is the work of God".⁹ This was true wonder and awe before which we can truly say "oh my God!"

The transfiguration of Jesus shines with scriptural allusion. Leviticus, with which Jesus would have been familiar, and its detailed account of God's instructions for making atonement for sin. Yom Kippur. Purification of sanctuary and people. Clouds of incense. Sacrifice of a bull and a goat. And the high priest was to take a live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and send it — the scapegoat with its burden of sinfulness — away into the wilderness. The High Priest, bathed and wearing brilliant white linen robes, was to do all these things alone. "*No one,*" says Leviticus, "*shall be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the sanctuary until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.*"¹⁰

Thus robed, the high priest was to appear before the people like an Angel of the Lord, a vision of God. He was to emerge from the Holy of Holies, wearing maniples on his wrists, and a Tiara with the Tetragrammaton — the name of God YHWH — upon it.¹¹ Just so did Jesus appear in shining white on that mountain — alone. Until Moses and Elijah seemed to join him. But Jesus alone shone as the vision of God. God's glory, freedom and love dazzling through the soul of this one man, Jesus. Who would later pray to God in that garden of Gethsemane as the dark shroud of night began to descend on his life.

⁶ John 13:30

⁷ Matthew 17:1-3

⁸ Ex34:29

⁹ Rowan Williams, from a sermon delivered at Canterbury Cathedral, 2 March 2003

¹⁰ Leviticus 16:17

¹¹ James Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, DOERS Publishing 2013, pp. 245-46. Ref. Girardian Lectionary for February 26, 2017, viewed 19/2/2017

Alone.¹² Who would go to the cross to do the sacrificial loving work of God, embracing powerlessness as both High Priest and atoning scapegoat, for the sins of the people. Alone.

Is it any wonder that Peter, James and John were dazzled and awed on that mountain top? Afraid, too, when they heard a voice from the cloud proclaiming, “*This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*”¹³ That silenced them. They’d been chattering excitedly before that, carried away with the shimmering glory of the vision. Their hearts stopped by what the poet Hopkins would describe thousands of years later as “the world ... charged with the grandeur of God ... [flaming] out, like shining from shook foil”.¹⁴ Peter, James and John wanted this incredible thrilling scene never to end. They wanted to stay on this glorious high — until that voice broke through their excitement. That silenced them. Understandably.

And the light faded and the cloud cleared and the vision of grandeur dissipated on the mountain air. And Jesus stood before them. Ordinary. Alone. Jesus led them down from the mountain where everything had changed for him — and for the three disciples, though they did not understand it. Down to the plain where everything was as ordinary as it had ever been. Where Jesus would continue to do the work of God as long as daytime lasted for him, and before the nighttime of his life when he would face the cross. There would be no brilliant light then. Only darkness covering the whole land.¹⁵ And the disciples would abandon him, terrified as Peter, James and John had been on the mountain in the face of God’s glory. There would be a different glory at the cross but they would not understand it.

Do we? Do we really understand this glory? We all know the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is about seeing the mystery and power of the glory of God and being transformed. Changed. “Changed from glory into glory,” Charles Wesley says in his famous hymn,¹⁶ a reminder that we are created in the image of God and are called to reclaim that image, that glory of our being. To become more Christ-like and more truly ourselves. William Blake writes that ‘we are put on earth a little space,/That we may learn to bear the beams of love’. The ‘beams of love’ that shone through Jesus on that mountain. The

¹² Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to Gethsemane but he went aside to pray alone. Mt 26:36-37

¹³ Matthew 17:5

¹⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’

¹⁵ Mt 27:45

¹⁶ TIS No. 217; *The [American] Hymnal* 1982, No. 657; *Hymns Ancient & Modern* No. 520

beams of love that shone despite the dread darkness when Jesus died for love — of us.

As like as not, you and I are not going to have a transfiguration experience such as Peter, James and John had. Our lives are down on the plain, ordinary and sober, where, as often as not, humankind dulls the creation's glory into something ordinary, pedestrian, more shabby than shining. Of course we want the thrill and the wonder and the awesome spectacle. Why would we not? After all, in our world 'awesome' is a word demeaned and devalued, bandied around till its head spins and it has little meaning left. Like 'oh my God'. And wonder? Too shy to show its face most of the time as we lurch from fashion to fancy to fad. There is so little room for wonder and awe, yet we have much need of it.

Which is why I think it's such a good thing that we are celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration on this day because we will gather sombre and reflective on Ash Wednesday this week to begin our Lenten journey. When we look into ourselves and ponder. About ourselves and about these next weeks begun today in shimmering glory on a mountain top — which will end on Good Friday in blood and sordid killing down on the plain. It will be hard to see those transfiguration 'beams of light' and love in the darkness then. In faith we will have to cling to the memory of the mountain top and know they will shine again — in Easter glory.

And through the long Lenten weeks there will be God's questions to ponder: *'O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?'*¹⁷ Over and over, louder and louder, we will hear that challenge as we move closer to the day when Jesus will take two very ordinary things — bread and wine — and offer them to us as his body and blood. Well might we then say "oh my God!". And we will know again that God's grace and glory are always with us in the most ordinary way, in the most ordinary moments of our lives. And transfiguration beams of light and love? We will not see them, and they will not shine through us, unless we get out of our own way. Name the pride and meannesses and bitterness and anger and sin that blot our souls — and turn ourselves inside out to change. How successful will we be? We will each only know in the secret places of our hearts but William Blake cautions us:

Unless the eye catch fire
The God Will not be seen
Unless the ear catch fire

¹⁷ Micah 6:3

The God will not be heard
Unless the tongue catch fire
The God will not be named
Unless the heart catch fire
The God will not be loved
Unless the mind catch fire
The God will not be known.¹⁸

In faith we know that, long ago on a mountain top, God was made known. Jesus, the Beloved, was “soaked through with glory and brightness”, revealing God’s self and God’s love to us. “Don’t be afraid,” Jesus said to Peter, James and John. And he says it to us. Well may we say “oh my God!”

May Jesus’ words carry you through your Lenten reflections and Transfiguration glory turn your hearts upside down.

(The Rev’d) Elaine Farmer, 26 February, 2017, Feast of the Transfiguration

¹⁸ An untraced Blake poem on Pentecost