

Proper 3, Transfiguration Sunday 2007

Exodus 34:29-35

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36

Today I'm going to talk about faces. Gazing. And to get us in the right mood I'm going to start with that well known theologian, Nancy Mitford. *Love in a cold climate*.

Cedric looked sulky, as he always did when I talked like this. 'More beautiful than one? He said. 'Very much like you, Cedric.' 'So you say, but I don't find that you gaze and gaze at *One*, on the contrary, you listen intently, with your eye out of the window.'

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Glory on a hilltop. Face shining. A hilltop with two companions Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets. A few verses later in the gospel and we read of Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem – to the crucifixion. Face again. Face, image, the principal organ of communication. Now on a few pages this time, and we have the face of agony, Jesus on a different hill, with different companions. A different kind of glory.

On today's hilltop we have the voice of God booming out his approval of Jesus. And at this point in the gospel story, this is a good thing, indicating as it does divine approval for the events that follow it in the gospel. Events that are unlikely, you would think, to be approved of by a loving father God.

You might think that the Transfiguration story is oddly placed here. It is more like a post resurrection story in some respects, and earlier biblical scholars suggested that those who put together the gospels got this in the wrong order. But it is so odd, it must be right. What are we to make of the transfiguration glory immediately followed by the journey to Jerusalem, and then the action on the other hilltop.

Today's festival for us is followed by Lent. Lent separates these two glory days. And I suppose today's festival is timely to cheer us up in February as we are about to enter into Lent. Because Lent is gloom and self-denial. WRONG.

Today's festival is certainly cheering, but it has nothing to do with Lent being gloomy, because Lent is not gloomy. George Herbert, more next week, described Lent as a feast, and so it is. It is a festival of growth. Lent means lengthening, and it is in the lengthening days of spring that we grow. It is fortunate that for us it happens in springtime, the growth season. (But then Christianity is a religion of the northern hemisphere).

Lent gives us opportunity to recall, reflect and renew ourselves, and renewal always involves some kind of growth. In biology, renewal means shedding of something we no longer need. And that's the origin of giving up something for Lent. If we give up something we like, self denial, only to gorge ourselves on it later, then we are being rather silly. There's no point in making ourselves miserable.

I'm not giving up chocolate, or crisps, or anything else like that. And certainly not gin.

Lent abstinence approached this way is surely rather silly. If I really want to emulate Our Lord's period in the desert, I will try to give up unwanted attitudes that tether me to old ways of thinking. If you want to do something really productive – and we all, every one of us, need to do something like this, I'd recommend that we all try to see ourselves as others see us. And then try to shed the attitude or way of thinking or behaving that shocks us the most about what we have seen about ourselves. If we imagine that there's nothing to get rid of, we deceive ourselves That would lead to growth.

Shedding. Discarding old skin, like a reptile. Or insect coming out of chrysalis, pupation, biological metamorphoses.

Which takes me to Paul's letter. Metamorphosis is exactly the word he uses to describe that change of which we heard. The change that comes as we look on the mirror. Faces again. Jesus transformed approaches resurrection. We too can approach Christ as we cooperate with his will, as we align our will with that of the Master, as we work according to his teaching. Then we too will be changed from glory into glory. We will, like the caterpillar become the butterfly.

Imago – immature organism. Image. We are in the process of becoming. William Blake.

For me, this is salvation seen not in terms of Christ paying any debt, but as through following Christ we approach the divine, *deification*. Salvation that comes from our participation in the already deified

humanity of Christ. This is the true goal of Christian life. This is what the *Transfiguration* is about, celebrating humanity glorified in Christ.

So I encourage you to look at the radiant face of the transfigured Christ that we have heard of today as an image of journey's end, the destination after all our sheddings, our metamorphoses.

Rather than concentrating, as the gloomier versions of Christianity so often do, on self denial and guilt and thinking about what we are saved from, we instead keep our eyes and intentions fixed on what we are saved to. Glory, radiance, joy.

Make the next six weeks an opportunity to clear out the rubbish in your soul that is clouding your vision. So when you look in Paul's mirror you will see not so much an image as if through a glass darkly, but an image of glory.

George Herbert can have the last word. 240

A man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye, or if he pleaseth, through it pass, and then the heavens espy.

If he pleaseth – the road is open to all. All we have to do is to want to travel along it. Then we too will be transfigured.

Amen.