

Changed for the Better – Transfiguration C

The purpose of our lection and preaching of holy scripture is, in the elegant phrasing of Cranmer's Advent collect, "...to hear them, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life..." Part of what makes the Anglican Church the *via media* (middle way) is the conviction that our beliefs and practices must derive from a thorough integration of scripture, tradition and reason. Though it is impossible to achieve perfect equilibrium, we are teaching and living heresy if we stress one of these three such that it obscures the others, to wit: the recent, unreasonable censure of the Episcopalians by other Anglicans. Our way of doing this should involve tolerance of a wide spectrum of theological belief and traditional opinion, as well as bold and searching talk about how the stories of faith history enable us to think about, understand and formulate the stories of our own experience.

Today's readings are a perfect example of the process of marking and digesting the old as a way of incorporating the new. If we would comprehend Jesus as the totality of the law and the prophets, we would do well to show how he embodies the greatest attributes of traditional heroes of the faith. Moses represents the law, so Jesus on the mountaintop shines just like Moses. Elijah was the quintessential prophet; thus Jesus will be whooshed up into heaven like him.

So we get this great scene on the mountaintop, where the observing disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and

Elijah and we know that he has all the attributes of the two of them combined. He represents the culmination of the stories of the law and the prophets, and now he is taking over from them for the next era of humanity's relationship with God Almighty.

As is so often the case, baseball provides a tasty analogy: Moses is the starting pitcher, laying down the law for the people and defeating their enemies, but he doesn't go all the way. Elijah is the manager, who foresees all that will happen, and has the entire confidence of the front office. And the two of them are out there at the top of the ninth, also known as "these latter days;" they're out there on the mound conferring, and handing the ball to Jesus, the true reliever, the closer. Immediately, or 'straightway,' as the King James so perfectly puts it, Luke has Jesus demonstrating his nature by defeating a nasty demon with a mere rebuke. Whereas all other scriptural heroes must – and do -- suit their actions to their words, in Jesus, the action is the word, God's Word – Jesus' very self – is God's action.

Luke's literary touch is especially deft. Although we talk about today's feast as "The Transfiguration of Jesus," because the other two synoptic Gospels say he was transfigured (metamorphoo in the Greek), Luke describes the scene thusly: "The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white...Peter and his companions were very sleepy; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him." In other words, Jesus did not change, he was not metamorphoed. Rather, his true identity became apparent

to his people because they stayed awake. It was they who were transformed, by their awareness of God. Better than Color TV, better than HD, better than Blu Ray and IMAX and Sensurround too. Such a revelation, whether by vision or experience or any other means, is the beginning of the transformation of all who choose to follow him. It is we who have metamorphosis in our future, if only we will embrace it.

It is as strange a scene as there is in the Gospels. Even without the voice from the cloud to explain it, they had no doubt what they were witnessing. It was Jesus of Nazareth all right, the man with whom they'd tramped many a dusty mile, whose mother and brothers they knew, the one they'd seen as hungry, tired, and footsore as the rest of them. But it was also the Messiah, the Christ, in his glory. The holiness of the man shone through his humanity; his face was so afire with it they were almost blinded.

Even with us something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking with his child in the park, of a woman baking bread or bathing a baby, of some random person listening to a concert, standing on the sand watching the waves roll in or just having a beer at a baseball game in July. Every once in awhile and so very often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing.

No wonder good old Peter wanted to put up some all weather pop-ups to preserve the party permanently. We love memorializing, making statues and plazas; it's something humans did long before Jesus, and we've been

doing it ever since. Tradition! But notice Jesus does not permit it. Instead he goes back to the work of healing. Jesus bypasses tradition, insistently and relentlessly moving straight from scripture – the word of God – to reason, the love of neighbor.

If we are transformed or metamorphosed, even if we should start to shine and our garments begin to glister, if we come to be changed by our encounters with the living God, we too must resist the temptation to merely preserve the awareness of power and glory and instead employ it for the work of healing one another; get out and start rebuking some demons ourselves. God knows there are plenty of them prowling around, terrorizing the innocent, preying upon the weak, destroying the planet, fomenting violence, killing the world.

All of us, with unveiled faces, are seeing the glory of the Lord and are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in ministry, we must not lose heart. We have renounced shameful things; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to all in the sight of God.