

Transfiguration A

Change and the Role of Theology in a Christian Community

You'll have to pardon me for a minute while I talk a bit of Episcopal talk. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, obviously so from the hymns and lessons. It's the only celebration in the church's calendar which has two days given to it. The first is the final Sunday of Epiphany Season, whenever that falls. The second is August 6th.

So the odd question is, why this anomaly? Why is the Transfiguration treated differently from all the other days of remembrance of events in the life of Jesus, remembrance of the saints, remembrance of Holy doctrines of the church? Why is this one different?

As is frequently the case in the Episcopal Church, an historical accident is responsible. In Eastern Orthodox Churches the Transfiguration is a really important celebration, a central day. This is largely because one of the greatest bursts of theological thought and devotional practice in the history of the Eastern Orthodox tradition centers around the Transfiguration. Its development is exemplified in the career of a man named Gregory Palamas. Gregory was archbishop of the city of Thessalonika, an Athonite monk and lived from 1296 to 1359. Now, what's going on in the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Empire around the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th centuries?

When does the Eastern Empire fall to the Turks? The middle of the 15th century, 1453. So, during the time of Gregory, the history of the Eastern Roman Empire as an independent political unit is winding down. The Eastern Orthodox Church is about to enter hundreds of years of domination by the Moslem Turks. To understand what's going on theologically in a church you must relate it to what's happening historically in the church's culture. So the question facing Eastern Orthodoxy at the time of Gregory, and most of them knew it, was how to respond to disaster, to the threatened and likely loss of freedom and in many cases of life. You can't find yourself facing the juggernaut with few resources and no lively options and not know that things are bleak. They knew it. For Gregory and his colleagues the response was not despair, but an immense burst of theological thinking and devotional practice. It's almost an illustration of a quote from a more modern poem, "In my end is my beginning." (T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*)

Well, in their end was their beginning. The Byzantine Empire is a memory in history books, but the theology and prayer of Gregory is living practice, an empire of spirit.

Gregory asks the question, What did the disciples actually experience when they saw Christ in glory during the Transfiguration? It's too easy to say they experienced Christ surrounded by a great light. That makes it sound as if the significance of it all was the difference between a 40 watt bulb and a 100 watt one. That's hardly the point. What Gregory does say is that through Christ they experienced the uncreated light of God's own being.

Now that needs to be unpacked. The first piece of unpacking is that Gregory, unlike some other theologians, believed humans are capable of the direct experience of God. (He was, after

all, a mystic.) The second piece of unpacking is that Gregory makes a distinction between the essence of God and the energies of God. I'm going to be bold and be a bit technical here. If we're going to understand our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters we must understand the difference between essence and energies. The essence of God is unknowable, unperceivable. There is no way, from our exterior position, that we can penetrate into the midst of the divine mystery and, somehow, understand God's inner life, his private inwardness. This should not be too surprising to us as we can hardly do such things with each other. If you run into a person who thinks he or she can know your inner being by looking at your exterior you've probably found someone who's a shade arrogant, or on a more charitable interpretation a shade naive.

But what we can't do with each other we can hardly expect to do with God. So, no access to the essence. But then God has another aspect to his being, that is, his relation to his creation. That relation to creation is an actual part of God's being. Again, the human analogy is helpful, although needing a grain of salt. We do know how other people act and that their actions are a part of themselves. That much is accessible to us. We know something about who they are from how they act. This has biblical warrant: "By their fruits you will know them." (Matthew 7:16)

So Gregory says that when we think of God, we can't think merely of an homogenized something in heaven. We need to think of God in terms of an inaccessible private inwardness which Gregory calls the essence, the mystery of God. We also need to think of that which comes from the mystery towards the creation, towards us. Gregory says that what the apostles experienced on the mountain was that aspect of God which comes towards the creation. They experienced it without hiding or veiling. And God's action toward creation is true God, not separable from his being or his identity.

This has some unexpected implications. First, for Gregory the physical world is of equal importance to the spiritual world in coming to know God. Therefore Christ is glory is still recognizably the earthly Jesus, not something completely different. The physical world is here and surrounds us as a result of God's, to make a horrible pun, energetic action. So we know God through a correctly understood creation. This puts Gregory Palamas in one camp and Karl Barth in a quite different one. But that's OK. Since when have Christian theologians agreed with one another as to the details? It is not to be expected.

Gregory also sees the human body as an essential cooperator with the spirit in the knowing of God. One does not know God disembodied. In the same way, the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration had to experience the energies of God by means of their bodies, or they would not experience God at all.

To summarize Gregory's argument: The Transfiguration is a true foretaste of the human condition in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom, God maintains his privacy. He is no more accessible to us in heaven than he is on earth. But in the kingdom we know how to interpret and understand his energies as distinct from the inaccessible essence. We may know God more completely in heaven, but that about God which we know is the same on earth and in heaven.

This school of thought is called Hesychasm. It has remained, since Gregory Palamas developed it, a central strand in the theological thinking of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Now, what does all this have to do with the Episcopal Church and with why we have two separate days for Transfiguration? In our church, theological conversations with Orthodoxy have a long history. There is a certain amount of established good will, which has survived such severe buffetings as our ordination of women and their denial of it. It shows a certain tolerance that despite such divergence from that which they see as fundamental, we're still talking.

So the Episcopal Church does occasionally learn from others and one of the things we've learned from the Eastern Orthodox is the importance of the Transfiguration. But, originally, the Feast of the Transfiguration was a largely mid-week celebration. But we celebrated it (except once every seven years) on a weekday in August. What happens to feast days celebrated in the middle of the week?

Congregation: Do they get bumped to the closest Sunday?

Not quite. In fact, except for a core of the most important feasts (Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and its dependents, Pentecost and All Saints) if a saint's day falls on a Sunday, the Saint's Day is moved to the nearest free day for celebration. Sunday, as the day of celebrating the triumph of God over sin and death, is the day of days for a Christian and nothing except a major aspect of that triumph can take the place of its general celebration.

Compare this with Ascension, a major feast remembering a major aspect of the kerygma, the proclamation about Jesus, which always happens on a Thursday. I would guess it is the least observed, at least in the Episcopal Church, of the feasts growing from the life of Jesus. Not because it lacks importance, but because everyone is at work.

The church calendar was created in a largely agricultural society. The Ascension was placed at a time of year when there wasn't much to do, agriculturally. During the late Spring, one hardly ever has to get the wheat in before the thunder storm strikes. People could and did attend week day celebrations, but it was a different world than ours.

The last time the Book of Common Prayer was revised there was a movement to increase the importance of our links with Eastern Orthodoxy. One move in that direction was to increase the importance of the Transfiguration by giving it a Sunday to itself. Besides the ecumenical aspects, it was recognized that we needed a day reminding us of the glorified humanity which is the destiny towards which Christians look. A day to point to where we are going is as helpful as days and seasons during which we examine where we've been.

Then, and this shows the Episcopal Church at its best, the revisors said, "We have a problem. We have a number of congregations which are used to celebrating Transfiguration on August 6. We don't want to deprive them of their tradition. So they can continue to celebrate it on August 6, and we'll keep that day on the calendar also. So, two days for pastoral reasons. Take your pick.

So, pastoral consideration trumped liturgical habit. Which is the way it ought to work until one has to surrender something central. But there is nothing central about having only one Transfiguration a year. The Greeks, among other things, have given us a word for that which is peripheral. The word is *adiaphora*. It's a technical word in liturgics and means stuff you can leave without leaving the central, stuff which may be fruitfully observed in some places and at some times but need not be observed in all places and at all times.

And there's a good deal of stuff we can leave behind. To be ridiculous but make a point, the Eucharist I'm about to celebrate will be celebrated with me standing on my two feet. I could celebrate, provided I were agile enough, standing on my head. It would be peculiar, but valid as an act of worship. One might want to ask why I would do such things and attribute the action to an unduly flighty spirit, but there would be nothing wrong with the liturgical actions and the service would still do what the church says it's doing during the Eucharistic. Posture doesn't determine validity, however helpful it may be in creating a devout spirit. Sit, stand, lie on the floor, it is the orientation of the heart which counts.

It's difficult to remember that our deeply ingrained customs about posture during services are nothing more than that – deeply ingrained customs. Helpful for most of us, but not for all. Appropriate for this place but not that one. The same is true of much else in our communal life.

Now St. Anselm, due to the presence of people unfamiliar with Episcopalian tradition, sits a little loose with these things, and I try frequently to move us gently toward the practice of a more complete Episcopalian tradition. After all, there are lots of unessential things which are still, for good reason, practiced as contributing to our holiness, our spirituality, or ability to do our duty.

I might shave my beard and remain the same person. But there are those who would have difficulty adapting to the change. My wife has told me so. Some things are not essential, but we continue to do them for good reasons.

One more point. The first really successful Anglican comprehensive theologian, a man named Richard Hooker, was active during the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth I. He makes, profoundly, the distinction between things unessential but good for the church, and those things which are essential. In the process, he lays down a general rule that has guided the church ever since: if something cannot be shown to be essential, it must be counted as *adiaphora*. Keep the things that must be believed as few as possible. Why? For the sake of the peace of the church. We cannot, of course, give up the essential. But Hooker warns us not to, in overactive zeal, start saying that things which aren't essential are. That leads to conflict. And our history proves Hooker to have been right. There was a time in the 19th century when a group of bishops wanted to de-bishop some other bishops because they had too many candles on the altar, wore colored stoles and a few things such as that.

We see such things as marginal. Sometimes fun, sometimes interesting, sometimes instructive, sometimes esthetically satisfying, sometimes inciting toward piety, sometimes

increasing depth of prayer, but never, never essential to being a Christian. Again, adiaphora. If we lived in a climate where it was appropriate I could celebrate the Eucharist in swimming trunks rather than layers of vestments and it would be just as valid.

This becomes ridiculous from our point of view because the issues of those 19th century bishops are not ours. But the people who did fight about these things were trying hard to be honest servants. The genuineness of their concerns cannot be argued. But it's quite possible for genuine concern to be both imprudent and mistaken. It is here that intelligence and theology, with a strong leavening of historical perspective and a seasoning of modesty become an essential part of the church's life. An intelligent theology needs to guide us in discriminating what's central to the faith and what's peripheral. That's its purpose. Theology serves the church not primarily by telling us what to think, but by pointing out where our freedom is legitimately active. So, one day or two for the celebration of the Transfiguration? Love God and each other and be free.

That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.