

Sunday of the Transfiguration

Luke 9:28-36

(Last of Epiphany, 2010)

I find Transfiguration Sunday a bit of a challenge. Perhaps because from this gospel reading it's easy to move off in directions I, at least, find unhelpful. It becomes one of those Biblical lessons in which one feels like an archeologist, looking beneath the surface for something worth keeping, looking in the layers of earth.

The problem is the supernatural aspects of the story. Anytime I run into the supernatural, there is the question, "What does this mean? How do I integrate this into a world of pension plans, politicians, administrative decisions, budget calculations, even feeding the hungry and seeking justice?" Most of the life of the church is made up of such things. At least much of what I do is trying to corral these definitely non-supernatural things into some kind of creative order that serves human beings. It seems more central to be able to express love by means of the ordinary rather than the supernatural.

But scripture confronts me with this story of Jesus on a mountain top. In it he's literally in the spotlight, shining away and having a conversation with persons who have been dead at least eight hundred years in one case and a thousand in the other. The disconnect between this story and what I spend most of my time doing is considerable.

Two observations moderate the disconnect. The first turns on the last verse of Lucy's hymn (*On the Mountain Top*, Words and Music by Lucy Goman, © 2000). The hymn text ends on a distinctively human and non-supernatural note: "On the mountain top, glory blazing, (At this point, we're still in the supernatural.) Christ the Lord, the Chosen One, stood with Peter, James and John, Glory be to God." In the last analysis, at the end of the stanza, God's glory is in Christ's standing with the human, not in his shining face or speaking to the dead. He stands with the human. When the supernatural fades, the human is still present and Christ descends the mountain along with those human beings who stood with him on its summit, and not in the palpable company of the supernatural. It is with those human beings that his life moves to its self-giving climax and at the end it is the humanity of the beloved disciple and the faithful women which remain when all else is gone.

That leads to a reflection about how the authors of the gospels pictured the transfigured Jesus. He did not become a pillar of fire nor a voice hidden in a cloud. The voice from the cloud was not the voice of the incarnate Jesus. What's transfigured in Jesus is precisely his humanity. The glory shines through his humanity not around it or in relation to something non-human. The Transfiguration of Jesus is not pictured as something from the realm of the supernatural and, therefore, alien to human beings but as something to be expressed in human form and recognized by its human face. The transfigured Jesus is a human being whose participation in the supernatural is through his humanity and not in spite of it.

At this point, I sigh with relief. After all, I understand human beings experiencing change, even radical change. To be surprised by joy or sadness is transformative. Sometimes the

change is destructive, sometimes constructive. It's important to note that when Christ is transfigured into glory, to use that rather quaint biblical language, it is his humanity which is so transfigured. Christian hope rests on the fact that the humanity of Christ is transfigured into glory.

Among the Eastern Orthodox, The Transfiguration is a major feast. It has the same stature as Christmas Day does with us and certainly as much if not more than Epiphany or All Saints. It's a big deal because the Transfiguration is the New Testament story in which hope is rooted as an aspect of Christian life. The question behind hope is, always, for what should we hope? There is something discouraging, sometimes to the point of depression, something fearful even, about an institution which proclaims its great importance and then offers hopes of a much smaller stature than its self-proclaimed importance. We in the church must be careful that the hope we offer is of a truly transformed humanity through which the glory of God is visible. I do not want a growing church or an active church or a successful (undefined as to how) church. I want a holy church so transparent to God that love may be seen through and in every facet of the church's life – including her mass mailing newsletters, her budget and finance meetings, and her long-range planning sessions. We have a long way to go before the transfigured humanity of Jesus becomes the texture of daily administration in the Episcopal Church.

It makes all the difference in the world whether the members of the church remember that their proclaimed hopes are larger than their lived lives, or whether somehow, they don't notice that. If we hope, in humility, to proclaim God's love in word and deed but remember that we frequently don't, then all is well. If our hope is not larger than the lives we live, I see no reason for the concept of heaven. Why have it if we cannot hope for more than we are?

At the same time, if the church makes claims for itself larger than its life and doesn't notice that they are larger, the situation is potentially disastrous. It is not more fundamental to Christianity to struggle to accept the supernatural than to remember the legitimacy of a hope larger than our experience. I find that, at least for me (and I make no suggestion that this ought to be so for others) the point to the supernatural is its sharp reminder that there are things to hope for which are beyond what I can get done or see being done, or anticipate humanity accomplishing in this world. The supernatural is not intended to be an accurate historical account so much as a means of reminding us of the unpredictability and lack of limits to God's presence in our lives.

For the second observation, let's take a look at the collect for the day. Even the version in the contemporary collects section of the Book of Common Prayer is phrased in marvelously archaic language. "Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, . . ." Immediately it tells us that we're not necessarily to seek the light of God's countenance in a scientific, historical or sensory fashion, but "by faith." In other words, even the Book of Common Prayer is having difficulty taking the Transfiguration literally. Otherwise, why not ask for a direct mystical experience in which we don't see the light of his countenance by faith, we just see it? Instead, the collect instructs us that we are to ask to behold that light by faith.

Then the collect says something important. It gives a reason for wanting to behold the light of Christ's countenance by faith: ". . . so that we may . . . bear our cross . . ." In bearing

our cross we are changed into Christ's likeness.

Now, a word of warning. Bearing the cross does not necessarily mean smiling and reacting positively to misfortunes. It does not mean putting up with idiots gladly. It does not mean a lack of irritation at things one ought to be irritated about. I've heard people use language along the lines of, "Well, that's my cross to bear" in relation to all these things. Relatives who insist on showing you the interminable slides from all their trips when they come to visit are, perhaps, horrible enough not to be trivializing the concept of the cross, but I think you get the idea.

No, the cross is more than this sort of thing. To bear the cross means to remember our humanity; to remember its limitations; to accept the fact that we will die; to accept the fact that between now and death we will fail; to accept the fact that no matter how much we love someone we will hurt them; to accept the fact that our achievements will, sooner or later, wear away under the friction of time to the dust and ashes of Ash Wednesday. To bear our cross is to accept all that and a good deal more. That kind of thing is not trivial. There is another non-trivial thing we need to accept, at least in so far as we are Christians. Our humanity, which is characterized by death and failure, is also capable of expressing God's love. The most difficult, most challenging thing for me to accept is not that I'm going to die, (although I don't particularly like that) but that between now and dying there is so much chance for loving which, for one reason or another, never quite seems to make it fully to the surface. It is not the fact of death which challenges my Christianity, but the failure of the perfection of love.

The hope presented by The Transfiguration is that somehow in our relation with Christ, the failure of our love is reworked in his love until it can become that perfected love which we are always missing. Now don't ask me to give you some sort of philosophical explanation of the process. That, I think, is why the collect says that we behold the light of his countenance by faith. I do not know how this happens, but believe that it can and does happen.

This makes sense out of the idea of bearing my cross. It makes sense out of what transfiguration is about. The transfiguration of Christ is the transfiguration of his humanity. Through Christ's transfigured humanity he has the power to transfigure my humanity. In hope, we may look forward not just to the perfection of God's love, but to the perfection of our own love as it is incorporated into the transfigured Christ. In him is our hope, not just that we be saved from sin and death, but that our failed love receives in him a completion and a transformation into perfection. That strikes me as a hope worthy of the glory of God. Hold to that hope in and for all your lives.

We are not, ultimately, the vessels of the failure of love, but of the transformation of sin and death into holiness and life and Christ makes us who we are and not the competition, self-centeredness, and anxiety of the world.

That, I think, is enough of that. Please stand for the creed.