

# Transfiguring Love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 27 February 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 8C - Transfiguration

Exodus 34.29-35, 15; Luke 9.28-36

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

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How do we picture transfiguration? Do you like the transfiguration mandala of Jack Haas (on the front of the worship booklet) for example? It is better than many as a prompt for reflection today. For the story, symbol, and spirituality of Christian transfiguration is rich and profound. Yet it can be a puzzle and portrayed in very limited dimensions, and can then seem quite distant to some of us.

Let me therefore offer four pathways into the reality and meaning of Christ's Transfiguration: four pathways on the model of the spirituality wheel of which Penny Jones spoke to us a few months ago, and to our Ministers Retreat this week. For transfiguration, as Jack Haas suggests, is like a biblical mandala, of enriching colour and creativity for our lives: a kaleidoscope revealing divine transforming love...

A first pathway into transfiguration is by the way of the heart. That is part of what we see in the disciples' reactions in our Gospel story today, responding to the immediacy and immanence of the divine light shining in Jesus. Their hearts and feelings are deeply moved. Can we feel the shock, the surprise, and the solace of their experience? And can we, like them, feel that same light touching and transforming our lives? For do you see, hear, and feel, transfiguration? I do, every day. It is one of the joys of ministry, as it is of life itself.

I see it, hear it, and feel it, in all kinds of places, in the faces of young and old: not just in 'mountain top' experiences of birth, baptism, falling in love, and marriage, but in everyday moments – as in the faces of grandparents when they see a grandchild; in the effects of even small touches of love which help bring light in suffering; and even on deathbeds, where the strains of bodies and lives are sometimes lifted away and light shines afresh, within, and from beyond.

I saw it yesterday, wonderfully, in a friend and public figure, who has been through private anguish in recent years but who shines with the unexpected love they have recently encountered. I see it, hear, and feel it in my own life, and in my own self and body, as I experience grace and love with others, and transfiguration within. What examples, I wonder, do you see? What shall we together offer up, and give thanks to God for, today? For, as the great second century Christian leader Irenaeus of Lyons put it: *'The glory of God is a person fully alive.'* That means that you and I are called to be living transfigurations.

That is how I see and experience myself, at my best, and my fellow companions in the Spirit. How about you? How alive are we? How alive are we to seeing, hearing, feeling - and celebrating – that reality today, and always?

Another of the great early Christian leaders, Athanasius of Alexandria, also expressed this in famous words: God in Jesus Christ, he said, '*became human so that humanity might become divine.*' Transfiguration is thus something to be found in and among us. For transfiguration is the life of God in us. It is as much as a reality for us, if in different ways, as it was for Moses and Jesus, and the first disciples. Our purpose, our goal, the meaning of our lives, is the gift and revelation of God's light: seeing, hearing, and feeling, the life of God in and around us.

We too are called to be transfigured like Christ. The Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Tradition in Christianity calls this *theosis*: deification or making our humanity divine. In Western Tradition it thereby aligns with what we call sanctification: the process of growing, through grace, in likeness or union with God. Whatever you call it, it is happening right here, right now, and Christ's transfiguration reminds we can taste its glimpses.

A second pathway into transfiguration is through the way of the spirit. That is part of the nature and origin of the biblical stories we hear read today. For we are also invited to know God's transfiguring love contemplatively - beneath and beyond the immediacy of our lives and human experience. Much ink has been spilled trying to interpret Christ's Transfiguration in the historic life of Jesus and the development of the early Church. Is it, for example, as some have suggested, a Resurrection story, placed earlier in the first three Gospels for effect and as a preview? Perhaps biblical interpretation can indeed help us in this.

However, one of the best ways we can approach the Transfiguration of Christ is contemplatively, seeing it as an icon, and an invitation to deeper spiritual life. Like an Orthodox Christian icon, maybe we do well therefore to view Christ's Transfiguration not so much as a picture of an event which may have happened long ago, with more or less 'realistic' details, but rather as an encouragement to deeper reflection. Instead of looking at, and analysing, the Transfiguration, we do well to allow it to look at us, and speak to us contemplatively.

Viewing transfiguration contemplatively, or better still being viewed contemplatively by the Transfiguration, helps us unlock its spiritual enriching, and our growth in the life of *theosis*, or sanctification. This takes us to the very heart of the Orthodox Christian Tradition, which values the Transfiguration so highly, and which, at its best, is grounded so deeply in contemplative spirituality. It also enables us to connect more fruitfully, from a deeper Christian spirituality, with spiritual insights from other wisdom traditions.

Indeed, not for nothing did the spiritual adventurer Jack Haas entitle one of his autobiographical works *Transfiguration: The Union of Spirit and Flesh*. For the Transfiguration of Christ is not an entirely 'special' event, but one which resonates with other revelations of divine consciousness in human experience. We might not agree with all elements of the attempts, like those of Jack Haas, to combine the insights of different wisdom traditions. Yet Christ's Transfiguration resonates with similar deep experiences of the divine in other spaces. Like them, it encourages us to open ourselves to the growth of such divinely human consciousness, or what some spiritual writers have called the 'Christ-ing' process.

In this, from an Uniting Church perspective, we are also invited to be renewed by the spirituality of John and Charles Wesley: for what they called '*entire sanctification*', or spiritual transformation, is available by grace through faith in this life. Indeed, many have rightly seen the Wesleys as offering a Western Christian approach similar to that of the Eastern Orthodox. For the Wesleys call us to the depth of religious experience, in which the Holy Spirit is intimately and constantly at work, enabling us to love God and others more perfectly. This, for example, is beautifully embodied in Charles Wesley's famous hymn '*Love Divine All Loves Excelling*' – a powerful expression of transfiguration at the heart of faith:

*Finish then, thy new creation;  
Pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in thee;  
Changed from glory into glory.*

A third pathway into transfiguration is consequently the way of the mind. For we are also invited to know the Transfiguration of Christ as a profound and multifaceted symbol of life and faith. Indeed, to some extent the whole Bible and Christian Faith is summed up in the story of Christ's Transfiguration. Jesus climbs the mountain, the way to God. Jesus meets Elijah and Moses, who represent the Law and the Prophets, which point to Christ as their fulfilment. They are enveloped by a cloud, representing the Holy Spirit, and, as at Jesus' baptism, God speaks, saying: '*This is my Beloved, listen to them!*'

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is thereby displayed, in the heart of which we see revealed the mystery of the person of Christ, both divine light and glorified humanity. Through this dual nature, God thereby both joins our humanity and raises it up, uniting us in Christ and fulfilling the purpose of our creation in Genesis. Whilst proclaiming this inner meaning of Christmas, the Incarnation, the Transfiguration thus also prepares us for Holy Week and Easter: for the Resurrection and the fulfilment of all things.

No wonder then that the ancient Church and the Orthodox Church give such weight to this story. It is all the Christian creeds wrapped into one, glorious, icon.

And the greatest glory for us is the promise, and reality, of participation in God. That's why Peter, James and John are present - representing, as archetypal disciples, all who share in Christ. For in them, Jesus is showing us the way up the mountain, the path to God.

Just as Jesus, as a human being, is transfigured, so we too, in participating in Christ, can be transformed into divinity. In this, is therefore, an encouragement to us to revisit our Christian Tradition intellectually: not least Orthodox, Wesleyan and Anglican wisdom, and the common inheritance of the early centuries from which much of that is drawn.

Such invitations to our hearts, spirits, and minds, are however incomplete without our hands. This is certainly at the very heart of the Wesleyan holiness tradition and its understanding of the outflowing of *theosis*, becoming divinely human. For a fourth vital pathway into transfiguration is the way of lived discipleship. 'Mountain top' experiences are wonderful, and Christ's Transfiguration is a reminder to the activists among us to stop and see, hear and feel, wonder and receive; thereby journeying more deeply into the heart of God, allowing our own hearts to be 'strangely warmed' in new ways, and for the Holy Spirit to work within us.

Yet we also have to travel onwards and outwardly, as channels of Christ's light today. For in our story Christ and the disciples do not remain on the mountain. Beneath and beyond the mountain lie the rest of their lives and the wider world. It is there, in the healing of our wounds and those of the world - in what one of our songs today calls the 'alchemy of healing' - that transfiguration is embodied afresh and realised. If we cannot easily salve the hurts of our world, including new forms of violence in Ukraine and elsewhere, then we can do what we can, and what we can will help transfigure, by the grace of God.

What then, this week, will we do, in the power of God's transforming love?

Let me conclude. By now, you will have gathered that I love the Transfiguration of Christ for each and every way it speaks to us. It also speaks to me particularly powerfully as a transgender person, for it reminds me that all of us are called to trans - to transform, to transfigure - in the deepest spiritual sense. Indeed, I wonder if, among other things, trans people are thereby God-given gifts today to point us towards transfiguration. For, as I have suggested, transfiguration is a rich and powerful symbol for reshaping Christian faith today.

What a difference it might make, for instance, if we saw, and spoke of, transfiguration rather than salvation as central to heart of Christian Faith. At the very least, emphasising transfiguration can help us see salvation as more dynamic and multifaceted than it is usually presented - not so much as being saved from this world as being saved for God's world. After all, sometimes the way some Christians talk about salvation makes it sound like little more than a get-out-of-hell-free card.

It is so much more, and it is to that the Transfiguration points and represents. For the Transfiguration of Christ encourages us to see that God is not apart from us, but here among us, inviting us to participate in divine life and growth. It speaks so powerfully throughout our Tradition - in the past, here in the present, and for the future - and not least through these words of Martin Luther, with which I close my Reflection today:

*This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise'  
We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way.*

This is not the goal but it is the right road.

At present everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.<sup>1</sup>

In the name of Jesus, the light of the world, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles", transl. Charles M. Jacobs, in *Luther's Works, Volume 34* p.24