

Through the looking glass: transfiguration is a queer thing

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 19 February 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 7A - Transfiguration

Contemporary Reading: from *'In Search of Queer Theology Lost'*
by Mark Jordan; Matthew 17: 1-9

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

There was once a monk who, whenever he passed a mirror, would look into it, wink, and say: *'so, you old rogue, who are you today, and what are you up to?'* It is a lovely example of what, at its best, today's queer theology asks. It is at the heart of what Mark Jordan was saying in our contemporary reading today.

In a striking manner, it also helps lead us into this week's great Gospel story of the Transfiguration and its meaning(s) for us. For the monk, queer theology, and our Gospel, each challenge us to deeper, more refreshing, ways of living and understanding life and faith. Each disturbs settled identities. Each offers us fresh insight into God: into divine Love and Be-ing, which can never be confined to any one identity, time or place. As one of my favourite memes has it, *'God is always transitioning'* – or at least, our understanding of God. As, and when, we grasp that, we also share in transfiguring Love...

Human beings are understandably drawn to stories and images. They give expression and form to our lives, relationships and world. Without them we struggle to find identity and meaning, coherence and connection. They are part of what we call the *kataphatic* pathway in theology and spirituality: which seeks to affirm what God and reality is - kataphatic being a compound Greek word from kata (meaning down or into) and phatic (speaking).

We can see kataphatic, affirming, theology in our Gospel passage today, as we are presented with some very rich images, each linked to great trajectories of spiritual experience and understanding. These include the central images of the mountain and light, together with other motifs which repay deep reflection - such as ascent and descent, discipleship and journeying, and particular figures and faces, including the face, or persona, itself.

On another occasion, I might myself reflect more on each. Indeed, the Transfiguration is one of my favourite passages. It is a kaleidoscope of spiritual image and story. Indeed, I regard it is an extraordinary icon of Christian Faith as a whole. Let us however leave such kataphatic, affirming, considerations for another time. Instead, let us return to the monk and the mirror.

Now, I have a love-hate relationship with mirrors. On the one hand, I've always adored them: not least the glorious gold-edged mirror on my mother's dressing table, where I enjoyed early stolen moments playing with jewellery, make-up, and wearing clothes denied to my assigned gender.

Among others, I also adore the wonderful theatre mirror that Studio Commercial have in Pilgrim House: though my wife says firmly that we will not be having one at home! Yet, for much of my life I also avoided mirrors, just as I avoided being in photographs, as I was not enamoured of the outward image I saw. For mirrors both reveal and conceal. Typically, they can also only reflect light and usually be part of the surface play that makes up so much of our lives. No wonder so many people have therefore been enchanted by the writings of Lewis Carroll. For it is not just queer folk who long to go through the looking glass, exploring, like Alice, the extraordinary wonderland beyond.

From an early age, I have also certainly delighted in halls of mirrors, found in wonderlands like fairgrounds, circuses and some museums. Indeed, I have always felt that much of life is like a hall of mirrors, not least when we look at the media, politics, and the Church. Some things and people, not least celebrities, are distorted and blown out of all proportion, whilst others appear distorted and shrunken in their real and life-giving significance.

The result is that we can live much of our lives with convoluted images of who we are and how we are to live. That is part of what the monk was constantly trying to remind himself of whenever he looked at a mirror. Whatever he saw was never reality as such, but a reflection; at best a glimpse of part of what he was, or what he was at that moment. The reflected light, and partial or temporary image, was not the Light, or ultimate truth, of all.

The Transfiguration is a powerful reminder to us that the light and images we see, and our conceptions of ourselves, are not the Light, or the ultimate truth, of all. Rather, they are but passing reflections in a mirror. Not for nothing is the Transfiguration therefore particularly treasured in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. For the Transfiguration witnesses to the ultimate, undefinable, mystery of life and God: what the Eastern Orthodox call the uncreated Light of God.

This is what our wisdom traditions call the *apophatic* way. This emphasises what God is not, and the mystery beyond words and images - apophatic, like kataphatic, being a compound Greek word, from apo (meaning up, or away from) and phatic (speaking). It reminds us that God and life are so much more than we can know, or even imagine.

Now when we enter the apophatic pathways of Christian spirituality we not only follow the monk and his approach to the mirrors that make up our lives. We also connect with the wisdom of others, including that of the great eastern faiths and spiritualities. Like the monk with the mirror, Buddhism, for example, encourages us to practice 'non-attachment' to the passing features of life and our images of self and society. Hinduism similarly talks of '*maya*', or illusion, as a key challenge: encouraging us to not be overly caught up in the play of surfaces in our world.

Meanwhile, if we understand them kindly, this is part of the gift of what have been called '*postmodern*' ways of understanding, including those of queer theory and queer theology. For so many of these also encourage us to go through the looking glass, like Alice, transforming our very notions of self, substance, and spirituality.

As we gather at the beginning of this special Mardi Gras and WorldPride season in this city of Sydney, we can see this time as simply an affirmation of particular identities - L-G-B-T-Q-I-A, and whatever else is in the current alphabet soup. Now, let me be clear; affirming such identities is most certainly no small thing. We all need a healthy sense of self, relationship, and purpose. That is something which faith pathways and identities also offer, alongside LGBTIQ+ communities.

Yet, as the Transfiguration proclaims, and Mark Jordan says in our contemporary reading this morning, we are also invited to something more. For that is part of the gift of queer theology to our world.

Mark Jordan puts it clearly and beautifully. *'Queer theology'*, he says, *'cannot just be a matter of cheering on or cheering up.'* Rather: *'it begins in the refusal to take identities as the basic units for a literal description.'* In other words, queer theology does not so much seek to consecrate LGBTIQ+ lives but to transfigure all lives.

Like the monk and the mirror, it subverts any claim to straightforward definitions of life and being. For culture, habits and concepts of life form what the great postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault called *biopower*. These can appear in right-wing and left-wing forms, and in everything in-between, all seeking to define what it is to be human. However, like the best of the great wisdom traditions, queer theory speaks out for other alternatives. For, as Mark Jordan puts it: *'The sharpest protest we can make against the fictions of biopower is to deny again and again that a human life can ever be identified.'*

So how do you identify? As I have said, it is vitally important to affirm all life-giving aspects of our lives and world. That is at the heart of Pride for LGBTIQ+ people. That is so when we also affirm other aspects of human lives which are still denigrated, despised or destroyed. Yet Transfiguration is about more than this. It not only says, for example, that a gay or trans person is in the image of God. It also says that the image of God in a gay or trans person, and in every other person, can become even more full of light, brighter and more mysterious than we can ever imagine. What a wonder, and invitation, that is!

The other day I discovered that someone, probably related to WorldPride, has put up a Wikipedia page about me. By and large, it is OK as far as it goes, as a brief snapshot of some aspects of my life. It, and other recent media portrayals of me, have been reasonably kind. Yet they are all, at best, like a brief glimpse in a mirror. They leave so much out and reflect a mixture of reflections, surface impressions, and assumptions. Yet, even if I were to write my own scripts, I would still not be telling much of the deeper realities of my life, and I would certainly be reflecting some of my own presuppositions and edited responses.

That goes for us all, does it not? In the eyes of God, are we not so much more than anyone knows, including ourselves? That is why, at their best, the great wisdom traditions of the world still exist: to help us in our journeys of dispelling illusion, as well as affirming what is good and true; to help us practice non-attachment, as well as joyful appreciation of identity; to help open us to transfiguration. Just as the face of Jesus was transfigured in our Gospel story, so we too are so much more than we often see ourselves to be, and what we are is so much less than what we shall be. For, as St Paul put it, in a passage often rightly linked to the mystical understanding of Transfiguration, now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we shall see Love in its awesome fullness, face to face. No wonder then that Marcella Althaus-Reid - arguably the greatest of all queer theologians - said, of queer theology: *'if Queer holiness has a characteristic, it may be its unrepresentability... Holiness is always the holiness of the Other.'*

Let me conclude, in the same vein, with one of my favourite quotes from a transgender theologian.

In an essay entitled *'God is a Many Gendered Thing: An Apophatic Journey to Pastoral Diversity'*,ⁱ B.J. Hipsher reflected on some of the wonderful ways in which gender diverse people show the image of God. Yet, beyond the kataphatic contributions gender diverse people make, B.J rightly emphasised the way in which they/we, like other queer people, call us to let go of fixed received identities and notions of life.

As B.J. Hipsher put it:

But is an image of a transgender God still too limiting, too small, to hold the God of the universe? The simple answer is yes. We need a trans-God all right...one that transgresses all our ideas about who and what God is and can be, one that transports us to new possibilities for how God can incarnate in the multiplicity of human embodiments, one that transfigures our mental images from limitations, one that transforms our ideas about our fellow humans and ourselves, one that transcends all we know and think about God and about humanity.

That, not only affirmation of the image of God in LGBTIQ+ people - and certainly way beyond mere 'inclusion' - is what we seek and celebrate at this time; not only amplifying light, but being amplified by the uncreated Light, transfigured beyond all our identities and imaginations, and winking joyfully in the mirror.

In the name of the One beyond names, the Light beyond all light, the Mystery beyond the looking glass. Amen.

ⁱ in Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Trans/Formations*, 2009, London, SCM, 99.

For more on Queer Theology, please see the recent ABC RN Soul Search program, featuring Jo Inkipin & Penny Jones, Peter Kline, and Benjamin Oh:
<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/soul-search/queer-faith-and-theology-atworld-pride/101919756>