

## The Transfiguration of our Lord

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white

This last Tuesday evening Avril and I were in Holy Trinity church in Stratford for a reading of a Shakespearean liturgy called "Seeing more clearly with the eyes of love." This liturgy interwove words from Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with words from the Hebrew love poem "Song of Songs" as well as words from worship traditions of the Church including, for example, the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimmitus. Five contemporary poets, including Lawrence Sail from our own Church Community, had written poems based on characters from the Dream, which both reflected and enriched the liturgy. Music and singing occurred during the liturgy often highlighting the words. Representing the discord, present in our own lives and in the world, was a wall built of large cardboard cubes at the front of the nave. Those who know the play will know that a wall also plays a significant, symbolic part in A Midsummer Night's Dream as of course do eyes. Twice during the liturgy members of the congregation were invited to come forward. The first time eyes were washed with your hands from a bowl of water and then dried. The second time we were invited to take a brick from the wall, which was eventually knocked down completely. I'll come back to these two symbolic actions later. The whole hour's experience was beautifully inspirational and I thank Lawrence for telling us of its happening. Like the three disciples' experience on Mount Tabor, I believe Christ was transfigured in that church in Stratford so all present were able to see more clearly the risen Christ with the eyes of love.

The transfiguration has been described as the greatest miracle of Jesus' life. However what happened before and what happened afterwards are also most significant. A week earlier Jesus had foretold his death and resurrection to the disciples and exhorted them "to take up their cross and follow him". In that moment on the mountain top three of his disciples see Jesus in all his glory, a foretaste of his Resurrection. And afterwards, when they came down from the mountain, Jesus heals a boy with convulsions, a boy who is foaming at the mouth. Jesus and his friends come back to the plain of reality, to the walls of life. Life on the plain of Jezreel contrasts greatly with the Mount Tabor experience.

We all have mountain top experiences, as I did in the church where Shakespeare is buried in Stratford this last Tuesday. Moments where time stands still; where we can reflect, question and try to come to some understanding of what's it all about. So it was for Peter, James and John when Jesus was transfigured, when the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became a dazzling white. As Madeleine L'Engle writes:

"Suddenly they saw him the way he was,  
The way he really was all the time. This is how  
He was, radiant, brilliant, carrying joy  
Like a flaming sun in his hands."

It was as if the three disciples had had their eyes washed, their cataracts removed so they could see more clearly Christ in all his divinity. Indeed Peter wanted to catch the moment and, having forgotten his smart phone, he suggested building three dwellings or altars, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

Of course these moments are difficult to capture and you certainly cannot live on the mountain top all the time. These wonderful experiences which enrich our lives, enrich them so that we can live more creatively in the ordinary. They can present a new perspective for life on the plain. The plain of Jezreel to which Jesus and his disciples descended has been a place of many great battles throughout history both before and after Jesus' life. The plain

may be beautiful but there's a great deal of blood there. Indeed this plain has another name - Armageddon, where some believe the final battle between good and evil will be played out. This is the place that awaited Jesus and the three disciples after the experience of his transfiguration. This is also the place where we live our own lives, where we build walls, not always of our own making, where we wage war with our own weaknesses, struggling with famine, poverty, natural disaster; where we try and find hope in illness and personal tragedy. Some walls have been present a long time. Walls built between black and white; between Christian and Muslim; between gay and straight. Other walls have recently been built between stay and remain; between Trump and Clinton or Corbyn and Owen. Walls are also built in families where individuals once close together become estranged, where relationships become bitter. It is those special moments, those moments when Christ is transfigured which give us strength to knock down the walls or at least create chinks to see through, chinks where we can see more clearly with the eyes of love, of the transfigured Christ.

Alongside the challenges of life on the plain, there are also the joys that warm our hearts and the relationships which make us whole. Transfiguration is a strange churchy word, rarely used in regular conversation. It focuses on appearance. When Jesus appeared in dazzling white we say he was transfigured or dramatically changed. Faith gives us the equipment to change how we see and how we are seen. We need to reflect his glory for he is the light of the world. And this transfiguration, this divine transparency, transcends time and personal space. We are, I believe, always changing, discovering new light and new love in ourselves. Our cultural acceptance of gay marriage and our growing goodwill towards transgender people is part of the high value we place on transparency and truth. They reflect our desire to see more clearly with the eyes of love; our desire to knock down walls and build communities of forgiveness and reconciliation.

It was while Jesus was praying that he was transfigured. Prayer can often provide a time for revelation. While humbling himself, Jesus was exalted. Prayer is a sacred space for connecting with God and the miracle of the transfiguration places an honour on our duty to pray. There are times to speak and times to keep silent. Transfiguration is to be experienced rather than explained. Like the disciples, who in those days told no-one of what they had seen, it will be better to watch and listen. So we are invited today to focus on Christ's transfiguration, to watch and pray, to knock down walls and to see more clearly with the eyes of love. Part of the liturgy read:

"We will see and we will pray:

The wall is down, for love is strong as death."

Bill Pattinson

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