

*John Docherty, 2014-03-02*

## **The Transfiguration**

It may not seem obvious why this should be, but the Transfiguration of Jesus, the passage we just read from Matthew's gospel, is one of the passages of the New Testament that I find difficult to get my head around.

It's a bit of an unusual event. Unusual, not just because of what happens – the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the face of Jesus shining like the sun, his clothes becoming white as light – but unusual because it is one of those events that seem to be a bit gratuitous in terms of his ministry.

In some ways, it feels a little bit like a few other events that strike me as being out of sync with my own image of Jesus as a usually quiet, confident, humble carpenter's son who is able to embody a powerful presence in Israel by the force of his teaching and the integrity of his life. In my mental vision of Jesus there's a charisma about him that draws people without the need for flashy miracles and spectacular demonstrations of power.

I'm not talking here about miracles like the feeding of the five thousand, or healing the sick. To my mind, those are consistent with his ministry and a manifestation of compassion and love.

No, the events that I have trouble with are the ones that seem like a flaunting of power in an ostentatious kind of way that doesn't really help me understand who Jesus is or what he wants of *me*. Things like converting water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Did God really take on flesh to dazzle a bunch of inebriated party-goers?

Events like Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee by strolling across on top of the water. Really? Are these kinds of demonstrations of power necessary for me to be able to believe that Jesus has a message worth listening to, and a Way of being that is worth following?

Please understand that I'm not questioning whether these events happened. I simply don't see how they add to my appreciation of Jesus' message.

Are they necessary?

Like the resurrection, the Transfiguration takes place in the shadows to some extent. The only people present are Peter, James and John, and they've been told to keep mum about what they've seen. It's not an event that broadcasts Jesus' divinity widely, though it certainly seems to be intended as a validation of his divinity. He is visited by Moses and Elijah after all!

Moses and Elijah ... Moses, the giver of the Law; Elijah, the first great prophet. The Law and the Prophets ... hmmm ... earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus says (Matthew 5.17) "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." And here we have the quintessential representatives of the law and the prophets showing up to put their stamp of approval on his ministry.

Well, I guess if I were a first century Jew looking for a Messiah, this would be important to know.

And if I were one of the 12 first century Jews looking for a Messiah who were hoping Jesus might be the One, this is *definitely* a piece of information worth having. Especially given the fact that these 12 may not have been the brightest bulbs in the chandelier.

For example, in the preceding chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." To which the disciples reply "... uh ... we didn't bring any bread with us ..." To which Jesus replies "... Duh! ... I'm not literally talking about bread ..." That's a paraphrase.

They were, by and large, simple men. They followed this rabbi faithfully, but they were simple men. They may have been courageous enough to leave behind their previous lives to follow Jesus, but were they courageous enough to get through the turmoil to come without an absolute certainty that Jesus was, in fact, the One?

Again, in the previous chapter of Matthew, Jesus says to the twelve : "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Would *I* be courageous enough to leave everything behind in the hope that maybe, just maybe, the guy I was following was the real deal? A little encouragement now and then, in the form of some kind of proof, or a hint of something undeniably awesome, might not be such a bad thing for morale.

So ... is this kind of supernatural event really necessary? Ghosts and luminous clothes and radiant skin, and walking on water and turning water into wine?

I don't know. I do know that I, yes, even I, need the occasional reminder that the One I'm following is the real deal. And I need a reminder, occasionally, that I'm created in the image of God. That's a pretty awesome thing, with some pretty awesome responsibility.

If I am created in the image of God - if you are created in the image of God – how does that knowledge impact on the decisions we make in life? If Jesus can be transformed in such a way that his inner divinity shines out through his face and even generates light from his clothes, are we also expected to somehow be able to share in that transformation?

When we are made “a new creation in Christ”, is the transformation complete? Am I really up to the challenge of following Jesus in such a way that I'm prepared to “take up my cross and lose my life for his sake?”

Well, fortunately for me, I haven't been put to the test on that front. Or, if I *have* been put to the test, I've either been totally oblivious to the risks I've encountered, or I've failed miserably in recognizing the fact that maybe I've chosen a safe path instead of one of radical discipleship. I simply don't know.

I *do* know that those occasional reminders that we are called to be something better than we usually are, are necessary for me. It's too easy for me to just relax and settle into a comfortable routine.

It's sometimes healthy to be poked a little, and encouraged to look at Jesus afresh and recommit to following him.

I think that's a large part of what Lent is intended to do for us. Poke us out of our complacency and remind us that we have a higher calling.

I haven't observed Lent for many years – that is to say, I haven't done the self-sacrificial “giving up” of something during Lent. I did observe Lent when I was a good Catholic boy, but I'm not sure I always quite got the point of it.

My friends and I would usually discuss what we were giving up for Lent. The idea, of course, was that we should give up something pleasurable as a way of ‘taking up our cross’. As kids, our choices were somewhat limited in terms of what parts of

our lives we had complete control over, so the target was usually something like candy,

or a sub-group of candy, like chocolate,

or a sub-group of chocolate like chocolate bars.

I would typically give up a sub-group of chocolate bars, like Mars bars. I kind of wish I were a catholic kid nowadays, so I could give up a sub-group of Mars bars, like dark-chocolate Mars bars (which I don't much care for anyway).

We Catholic kids held to the strict requirement of giving up something pleasurable, while still attempting to make it as tolerable as possible (to be fair, it also meant we were much more likely to actually follow through and abstain from this thing, if the sacrifice weren't too onerous).

I'm not proud of my history of Lenten observance. I think that, because as a child I more or less went through the motions without really understanding the real point of it all, that I was left with a somewhat dim view of this kind of spiritual discipline. It felt either too legalistic, or too otherworldly.

My appreciation of the value of this kind of practice changed though, following a couple of trips to Haiti with Christian Peacemaker Teams in the early 90's. We were there to replace the UN Civil Mission as informal international observers, following the coup d'état of Raoul Cédras, and the first ouster of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

While we were there, the UN imposed an embargo on most goods entering the country, and the situation for ordinary Haitians, never particularly rosy at the best of times, was exacerbated by shortages and a dramatic drop in employment opportunities.

When I returned to Canada, I was only too aware of how easy it would be to slip back into the routine of life and lose touch with the suffering of the Haitians I'd left behind. I decided that while the embargo was still in place, I would forego eating lunch.

On a symbolic level it was my way of "sharing in the suffering of the Haitians", though, of course I wasn't really suffering – I still had enough to eat, though not at my usual times - and my gesture didn't improve the life of anyone in Haiti.

The embargo continued for about a year after my return to Canada, and during that time my biggest challenge was not pigging out at suppertime.

But the real point of the exercise wasn't that I was somehow contributing anything to life in Haiti. Neither was it that I was somehow a better person for my sacrifice.

The point for me was that every afternoon, about 2:30 or 3:00, my stomach would start to complain. And I would be pulled out of my routine and be reminded that things were not yet resolved in Haiti. And I would remember the people I had left behind. And I would remember the other participants of various CPT teams who had replaced *our* team.

And I would remember that there was still work to be done.

And I would be confronted with the need to decide whether I was ready to recommit to engaging in this practice, and to the work needed to make the world a better place.

And I think this is the real value of the Lenten practice of self-sacrifice, at least for Mennonites. It's the intentional imposition of limits and some discomfort that prods us to think beyond ourselves. It's less about participating in a theology of necessary suffering, and more about a deliberate act of reminding ourselves of what is important.

And that might differ a bit from person to person :

It might be our relationship with God;

our relationships with each other;

the work that still needs to be done to make this world a better place;

our family; ...

So far, I've been speaking in terms of 'sacrifice', giving something up. But, as Amy reminded us last week, Lent can also be a time of adding something to your life that will help you remember what is important, rather than removing something from your life.

So then, as we are reminded on a daily, or weekly, basis of what is important, as we get ‘poked’, we can then resolve to work at letting the transformation happen that will bring us closer to being a more faithful reflection of the image of God.

We’ve been announcing for a couple of weeks now that we’ll be holding a pancake meal after church next Sunday. We’ll maybe have another announcement at the end of the service to give more detail on what to expect, but let me just say that the invitation is there for everyone to consider observing Lent this year, either by giving something up, or by intentionally incorporating some specific activity into your life that will ‘poke’ you from time to time, and remind you why you are doing this thing.

It’s certainly not a requirement for faithful discipleship. But neither should it be a lighthearted romp through the month leading up to Easter.

If you choose to engage in this as a spiritual practice, you should take it seriously. And, at our pancake meal next week, we’d love to know how, and why, you’re doing what you’re doing.