



Some Thoughts on the Transfiguration

At various times in our lives, we experience something which could simply be described as a *disruptive event*. The import and effect of such events can of course vary dramatically, depending on a number of factors. But as a starting point for our reflection this morning, let us say in broad terms that a disruptive event prevents our lives from continuing as normal or as expected; it is an experience that stops us in our tracks, alters the world as we previously knew it, and has the potential to transform our lives...perhaps for the better, but perhaps not.

I think it is fair to say that 2016 was a year of disruptive events. No one could have predicted that Leicester would go on to win the Premier League last year. As a team who in previous years floundered in the lower half of the table, their amazing run of success defied explanation from expert and layperson alike. In America, the Chicago Cubs overturned 108 years of futility, curses, and near misses to finally win baseball's World Series. I know for myself as a long-suffering Cubs supporter, it took a while to come to terms with the fact that a team who had for generations been called the "loveable losers" had finally won baseball's biggest prize – my world as a supporter had altered, and the euphoria of their victory carried me for several days.

On a more serious note, it was of course also a disruptive year in the world of politics. The seismic shocks of the UK voting to leave the EU, and Donald Trump's victory in America, continue to reverberate on a daily basis and for a number of reasons which we are still coming to terms with, not least for the way in which both events defied all the data suggesting that they would not be successful. And of course both events have instituted a new reality for both countries and indeed for the world, and the impact of this disruption will be felt for many years to come.

Disruption can overwhelm the senses, defy comprehension or explanation, leave us numb or dumbfounded. Sometimes when we go to a provocative play, or film, or art exhibition, we can

find ourselves confronted with a kind of sensory overload when trying to process the impact of the experience. Disruptive events can also harm us psychologically. We know from psychologists that we sometimes experience events which can be so overwhelming or traumatic that we develop distressing or confusing feelings afterwards. They can also cause intense physical reactions as well. Such events disorient us and can even overwhelm us with feelings of sadness or anxiety. But in addition to the effects of the event itself and how we process the meaning of them, we eventually come to the realisation that the world is no longer the same as it once was. Something from the "outside", as it were, has invaded our lives in an irrevocable way. There is no going back to our previous view of the world. Something has changed forever. But are disruptive events meant to be avoided or dismissed as a blip on the radar screen of everyday life? Tempting as it might be to take this view, perhaps disruptive events reveal something about the nature of reality itself.

It is probably fair to say that the disciples who accompanied Jesus up to the mountain experienced a considerable amount of disruption when they experienced the transfiguration of Jesus. According to the account in Luke, Peter, James and John go up with Jesus to pray with him. We are told that they are heavy with sleep when they get to the top of the mountain. Suddenly, the glory of Jesus is revealed to them. They are aroused from their sleepy state by the bright light – bright as the sun and white as lightning. The disciples are disrupted out of their previous knowledge of Jesus and experience something completely new. The experience is so overwhelming and disruptive that it exceeds their comprehension. And they are so terrified that they either offer to do something nonsensical (Peter offering to build a shelter) or simply fall to the ground facedown.

In the church tradition in which I grew up, we often spoke of "mountain top" experiences, some event or experience where we sensed that we

perceived a more intense encounter with God than we would normally experience in everyday life, and such experiences would greatly strengthen our faith. Inevitably, when I started to rely on these experiences to sustain my faith on regular basis I was quickly disappointed. Such events—whatever they are in reality—are not meant to be a regular occurrence in our faith journey. And as much as a surface reading of the text would tempt us to conclude that the disciples' experience of Jesus' transfiguration was a kind of "mountain top" experience, to do so would be to miss a great deal of what is really going on in this event. Here we see that even when presented with a brief glimpse, a trace really, of the glory of God, it completely overwhelms all our categories for how to describe or interpret an event in its totality.

Of the many possibilities of what is "going on" in the event of the transfiguration, I would like to highlight two such possibilities for us to reflect upon this morning. I am going to suggest that these possibilities contain a kind of paradox, a kind of secret which both reveals something of itself and yet hides its full meaning at the same time. That is, we can see traces of a deeper reality about Jesus and yet the revelation resists full comprehension at the same time. And for this reason it is important for us to not simply look at the story of the Transfiguration as merely a historical event, or as a story with little resonance for us in a world where such events do not take place. For to do so would be to overlook the disruptive, incomprehensible realities which are given witness in the event of the Transfiguration, and which still deeply reverberate to this day. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze argues that the meaning of an event is discovered not merely in terms of what happens, but in what might be going on *in what happens*. The truth of an event, he suggests, is constantly insisting on existing long after the duration of the event itself has ceased.

So what might be going on in the event of the Transfiguration? The first possibility I would like for us to consider is the way in which the Transfiguration provides a glimpse of the future. In the Transfiguration the divinity of Christ is revealed to the three disciples. To think about a religious event solely in terms of the future can be a bit difficult for us to come to terms with, since so much of our theology is concerned with what *was* or with what *is*. And yet it is clear that

the revelation of God's glory in this manner points to the future reality of redemption and of the promise to make all things new through the resurrection. We see that there were visible signs of this Transfiguration which provide a brief glimpse into the future, yet this revelation of God's glory embodied in Jesus also reveals something secret, something inaccessible about a future we cannot fully know. As the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka describes it, something has not yet arrived—neither in the history of Christianity itself nor by means of the spiritual journey of faith. What has not yet come about is the fulfilment of Christianity itself, within history and possibly beyond it, of the new way of being that we catch a glimpse of in the Transfiguration.

In this sense, we might say that the paradox of the Transfiguration, with regard to the way in which it provides a glimpse of the future, that it offers a kind of *gift* that is not fully present. That is, the revelation of God's glory is the gift of something whose full meaning remains inaccessible, beyond our ability to explain and therefore retains a secret even as it reveals something about the glory of God and of the future resurrection and transformation of all things. All we are told in the text is that the disciples hear a voice that says Jesus is his Son and that they are to listen to him. And as if to add to the element of mystery and secrecy to this revelation of the future, Jesus commands the three disciples not to tell anyone what they have seen until after the resurrection (something of course the disciples at this stage would likely not fully comprehend anyway).

And thus the experience of this event must have been a tremendous disruption for the three disciples: they caught a glimpse of something, but they comprehended it only *as* mystery or beyond their ability to apprehend; perhaps some of the fear they experienced from this disruptive event derives precisely from *not knowing, not understanding*, and whether it will happen again, where it might happen, and when, or what this all means, and why this particular way to reveal God's glory? A glimpse of the future has been revealed, and yet it exceeds their seeing and their knowing. They saw, but they are distressed both by what they saw and by what they cannot understand. In that moment Jesus, embodying the glory of God, holds his witnesses in his gaze, yet remains inaccessible. The disruptive event of the Transfiguration opens up a huge dissymmetry

between the infinite glory of God and their finitude, and between the divine gaze that looked upon them, and they who could not bear to see nor comprehend what is looking at them.

In addition to this glimpse of the future, I would also like to suggest that what is “going on” in the event of the Transfiguration reveals something about the present – and here we will find a glimpse of a deeper reality that has more direct bearing upon our everyday lives here and now.

As I have been suggesting, a religious experience—or revelation, in the context of the Transfiguration—is an expression of an event, or more exactly, of something that is going on *in* or *through* the events themselves. Even outside the realm of religious experience, when we look at a great work of art, we sometimes discover a “truth” or a “reality” that cuts through the representation on the canvas. Equally, there may not have been a historical Hamlet, but the power and resonance of the character in Shakespeare’s play transcends that factual issue. What these have in common with events like the Transfiguration is this: religious truth, and perhaps truth in general, is not simply given assent or acknowledgement representationally. Religious truth is also *witnessed*. We see this in the words of Peter and John, where the former says in the reading we heard earlier that *we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*. Likewise, we read in the gospel of John that the disciples *have seen [that is, witnessed] his glory, who came from God, full of grace and truth*.

So what does this mean, that religious truth is witnessed? Among other things, it says something important about the present, about the way truth works, and the way in which we embody such truth. To give witness to a religious experience is not to describe it...or at least not merely to describe it. For it is also to be an agent who reveals that the Divine is greater than any language we use to describe it, greater than anything to which we refer when we use the word Divine. And when we do this exercise in humility we affirm the utterly transcendent Divine nature beyond the language we use.

And underneath this point about the giving witness to religious truth and its implications for the language we use is an even deeper truth: The result of an overwhelming, category-defying experience such as the Transfiguration is not

generally greater insight or making things more clear (at least not at first!). For we must remember that even after such a disruptive, shocking event such as this, Peter later denies that he even knows Jesus! So what seems to be revealed in this event itself is the way in which such an experience *disturbs* or *disorients* us; we become more keenly aware of a restless, unsettled and disrupted spirit which seems to be satisfied only in its dissatisfaction.

The Transfiguration is an event that exposed its witnesses to the impossible, and in so doing disrupts the possible so that it can go beyond itself, to expand its previously known limits. In many ways, Jesus’ parables have a similar function insofar as they can be understood as revealing something disruptive going on underneath what is being described. So rather than clumsily try to adopt these parables into rules for ethical conduct, the pure hospitality or pure gift hinted at in these parables (what is also known as a hyperbolic ethic) *gives witness* to the workings of the impossible *precisely* in order to disrupt or transform the workings of the possible. The way in which these parables announce the coming (and already present) Kingdom by transcending the economy of give and take, of action and reward, speak of the transformation already at work and still to come, and in this sense gives witness to the glory of God. The sheer multiplicity and impossibility of the ways to arrive at the Kingdom give witness to the point that there is no single formula simply because there are *too many formulae*. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard observes that the response to the revelation of disruptive events such as these is not to arrive at the certitude of being a Christian, but to constantly strive in the becoming of one, and in that becoming begin to see that the Kingdom is not far off.

Again, this way of seeing gives richer meaning to the disciples’ statement that they have *witnessed* or *beheld* his glory. Yes, it means they witness the visible glory of God, but it also means so much more than that. As the philosopher and theologian John Caputo suggests, the whole idea behind the disruptive nature of most religious experience is that something more, something deeply at work, is affirmed in the beliefs to which we assent and the practices we embrace, and that affirmation is advanced even with, or rather precisely by, the disruption of our experiences and practices. The Transfiguration, along with

religious experiences and disruptive events more broadly, give witness to something very profound about the present of our everyday lives: it gives witness to the notion of truth as generative.

Disruptive events give witness to the fact that faith is not a safe harbour but is rather a risky business. God is not a warranty for a well-run, mechanistic ordering of the world but is rather the origin of a generative process; the journey of faith is a process that calls us insistently...sometimes marked by unwelcome interruptions, but nonetheless a quiet yet insistent invitation. Disruptive events testify that the journey of faith is inhabited by a restless hope, a more deep-set yet unfulfilled desire evoked by a promise to make all things new. Disruptive events give witness to the presence of a gap: not a gap that God fills but rather opens more deeply. The glory of God—which was revealed to the disciples on the mountain and continues to be revealed to us when we enact the things which constitute the Kingdom—makes present a space disrupted by a past we can never recall and an unforeseeable future.

As we go into Lent, may we take courage in the promise that the glory of the resurrected Christ journeys with us, whether we in a place of peace or a place of disruption, whether we find ourselves on a mountain top or wandering in the valley. As witnesses of both the disrupted present and the unforeseeable future, we testify that God, as wholly other, can be found wherever there is the trace of the wholly other in the world.

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