

Sunday, 7 August 2023
The Feast of the Transfiguration
2 Peter 1.16-19; Psalm 97; and the Gospel of Luke 9.28-36
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'You are included. You are included in the story and glory of God.'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

It can be hard when someone doesn't see you or recognise your identity. At a recent fundraising dinner for the Wren Project, a lady bounced up to me. She was delighted to see me. She said that she had attended a memorial I had taken and that I had spoken so beautifully. Some moments later, the husband of that lady came up to me equally enthusiastic. He added his praise and confirmed that my words at the memorial were all the more impressive because I had had a tough act to follow, you know, after David Attenborough. By this point, I was pretty sure that I had not attended or led a memorial service in which I spoke after Sir David Attenborough. I mean, I would have remembered, no? So, I felt it my duty, as your curate, to alert our Rector, in case news got to you and Lucy that I had somehow 'gone rogue' and was leading memorials around the country. Alas, it wasn't me that was at that memorial, it was Lucy Winkett. Somehow in the minds of this well-meaning couple, I had been transfigured and had become Lucy Winkett. I mean, I know it is really easy to mistake us for one another.

It can be hard when someone doesn't actually see you or recognise your identity.

The Transfiguration is an exceptional and relevant event in the life of Jesus because we see Jesus's identity. We are also reminded that we are included, we are included in the story and glory of God. We do not worship a God who is up there while we are down here, suffering from the extreme heat, blazing fires, sewage in seas and our rivers. We worship a God who is *in the midst of all of this*, wondering how and when we will see that our inclusion in the story and glory of God gives us permission to act with an urgency that speaks of the Transfiguration. Jesus was on the mountain with Peter and John and James not because they were *needed* for the Transfiguration to occur but because they *had to witness* Jesus's true identity and purpose, in the same way that Jesus had to give them an opportunity to take their rightful place in the story that was unfolding. They were included. They were included in the story and glory of God.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Something has happened here that is beyond human understanding. Jesus is identified as a being who is set apart, and identified as someone more than who we see and fully understand in his human form. And as one scholar tells us:

One of the significant details of the story that is unique to Luke's account of the transfiguration is that it occurs in the context of prayer. Neither Matthew nor Mark mentions that Jesus had gone up on the mountain specifically to pray (verse 28), and neither mentions that Jesus was praying when the transfiguration occurs (verse 29). It is clearly a point that Luke wants us to note.¹

In Jesus being included and identified in the story of humanity, we are reminded that we are included. We are included in the story of God. In the context of a conversation with God, Jesus's true identity is revealed and affirmed. It is in the context of intimate conversation with the divine that our truest selves can be made manifest.

...they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35

The reality of this image is that Jesus's identity as a great prophet is amplified with the presence of Moses and Elijah. And his identity as the Son of Man, and the suffering and rejection that comes with that, which Jesus spoke about only eight days earlier in Luke 9:21 -27, collides with his identity as the Son of God here in this moment, at the Transfiguration. We see past, present and future all at the same time. And Peter is there in the cloud; they all are. Peter wants the divine moment to last forever. The presence of the apostles and Peter's words remind us again that you are included. You are included in the story and glory of God.

Peter confirms that he was there in his epistle, and with this affirms that the mountain top is not just for prophets and ancient heroes, but for us too:

... we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty...We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

We are included. We are included in the story and glory of God.

¹ Schaaf, Scott 'Commentary on Luke 9:28-36 [37-43]': <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-928-36-37-43-2>.

Such inclusion comes with great responsibility. We cannot unsee what has been seen. We cannot unsee the ethnic violence against women in the Indian state of Manipur, and the video released of the minority Kuki women who were violated and paraded by men who chose to be perpetrators. If we are standing on the mountaintop with Jesus, who is in the valley? If we are witnesses to a transfigured Jesus, who is not able to make the same climb and see what we see? The victims of this horror in Manipur are not alone. They are joined by the women in Ukraine and Sudan; they are exposed, but not to the light of the Transfiguration. Their opportunity to be included in the story and glory of God has been blocked by human savagery, greed and vested interested. Do not tell me that the mountain top is for men alone. Because, despite the all-male presence on the mountaintop, patriarchy is not written into the story and glory of God. We are.

About ten days ago now, I had the privilege of spending a fabulous week with a group of 17/18 year olds. It was part of my other work, leading the Salters' Institute, an education charity focused on promoting chemistry and the related sciences. I had designed a pilot programme to help students transition to university, with jam-packed week that included a session with a clinical psychologist on mental health and wellbeing while at uni, and a cookery course to give them some healthy, delicious, and cheap recipes with which they could impress friends. No teenager was going to live on overcooked pasta or pot noodles on my watch. It was a wonderful week of growth and learning. On one of the evenings, we took this group of not-so-quiet teenagers to see Barbie, which was a hoot. In the film Barbie, Barbie says "'We fixed everything so all women in the real world are happy and powerful!'" A reading of news headlines confirms that this is far from the case. As one reviewer writes:

In actual life, it goes without saying, men still have no shortage of power – in the world writ large and Mattel in particular, where according to the company's website, all but one of the current executive officers are men...Still, the fact that men play a major role in determining what girls and women will consume puts a slightly dark spin on the movie's gentle self-mockery.²

Sex and gender remain politicised and the Gospel reading such as the one we have had this morning are weaponised to say that women and girls are nowhere to be seen near or in the presence of God, are not to be in leadership or as witnesses to Jesus and God's love. But that is reductive reading because the reality is that no matter your gender or sex, you are included. You are included in the story and glory of God. As Eric Franklin writes:

² Joanna Weiss, 'What Barbie says about the gender wars', *Politico*, 21/07/2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/07/21/barbie-has-something-to-say-about-the-post-patriarchy-00107319>.

Luke presents the transfiguration not as the fulfilment of a promise, but as the anticipation of something greater. [There is] both to the warning of imminent suffering and to the promise that out of it will come a future glory. The transfiguration becomes a guarantee of that (p. 940).³

The Transfiguration offers us the anticipation of something greater, of the journey with and into God to not only reveal Jesus's identity, but our own. And it tells us, too, that this journey will not be without challenge or suffering.

James and John and Peter entered the cloud. They were not set apart, they were there, right in the middle of it all with Jesus. *They were there*. We are there and Jesus is here with us to. You are included. You are included in the story and glory of God. And that glory has more to say than your fear, has more to say than your shame, has more to say than the rejection you have faced, or the names that you have been called. That glory is love expressed for you, as you are. We are seen and known to God because the transfiguration is the anticipation of something greater, of this story with God, which we co-create with the divine who is all love and compassion. In the words of David Suzuki, Canadian environmental activist and broadcaster, when speaking this weekend about the climate emergency:

"I say despair is a luxury we can't afford any longer," he says when asked how he remains positive. "If you care at all about your children or grandchildren, then it seems to me you have no choice but to try. My hope is that trying shows that we believe there is a different possibility - that we can make a difference."⁴

The Transfiguration was a singular moment with eternal consequences. And we stand in the present time with the choices behind and before us. We are included. We are included in the story and glory of God. There is a different possibility. As Peter reminds us:

19 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Peter speaks of eternity and of Jesus's return to earth. Before that though, we have much work to do. We have the lamp to shine in the darkest places of the earth. Despair is not an option, hope is not a fancy, and the promise is real. You are included. You are included in the story and glory of God. Let us step into that glory, for the love of God. **Amen.**

³ Franklin, Eric, 'Luke' in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.922-959, p 940.

⁴ Adam Morton 'David Suzuki on fighting for action on the climate crisis', *The Guardian*, Saturday, 5 August 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/aug/06/david-suzuki-climate-action-crisis-in-conversation-natasha-mitchell-melbourne-museum>.