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The Transfiguration and the Church's worship

In this study of the transfiguration, Chris Hollingshurst shows that there is much in the gospel accounts that has been neglected by those looking for texts through which churches can be refreshed. Through transformational worship the Church is enabled to receive divine revelation. Revelation of the glory of God demands that the Church responds in further worship and mission.

You might think that asking what the transfiguration of Jesus has to do with the worship of the Church is an odd question, the stuff not just of hazy mountain tops but perhaps of ivory towers too. Put it another way: the transfiguration is ripe for theological study, and occasionally a sermon, but would you consider using it as the basis for a parish weekend or residential houseparty? I want to suggest that the idea is not as outlandish as it might initially appear, and that a serious consideration of the biblical material, especially Luke's account, offers significant pointers for our understanding and practice of worship. Why do I say this?

Admittedly, the transfiguration has always fascinated me. A priceless jewel hidden within an entire vault of spiritual riches, it is a unique but frequently neglected episode, both within modern theology and in the life of the contemporary Western Church. Academic studies are still relatively scarce and, perhaps because of the complexities involved, have largely confined themselves to debating the detail and exegetical meaning of what happened on the Mount. Similarly, liturgical textbooks have sometimes restricted their comments to the difficulties in basing corporate worship upon the gospel accounts of the event.[1] It is as if, having discovered this hidden treasure, we have proceeded to leave it in the vault.

Peter's first reaction to what he saw – 'Lord, it is good to be here!' – is typical of his tendency to be both 'wonderfully right and utterly wrong' at the same time,[2] but as we read of the encounter we must surely share in his wonder. For Christians it *is* good to be, as it were, on the mountain alongside Peter, with James and John, and through the experience to learn not so much about the worshipping Church but about the God whom we meet in and through worship. This overview of the Church's worship and the transfiguration may therefore be considered in two parts:

1 See M. Perham, *Liturgy Pastoral and Parochial*, SPCK, 1984, pp 176f, who effectively advises how to minimise the disruption caused by the Church of England's lectionary providing the Transfiguration Gospel for Lent 4 (Mothering Sunday).

2 A. M. Ramsey, *Be Still and Know*, Fount Paperbacks, 1982, p 63.

first, crucially, that in the transfigured human Jesus the radiant glory of God was revealed; second, that particular aspects of the story may reveal particular and perhaps unexpected lessons for worship.

Revelation of the glory of God

Of course, any exercise of this nature will inevitably struggle to come to terms with picturing what took place and, as has been implied, much of the ground has already been covered; but a degree of reflection on the fact that Jesus was transfigured is fundamental in considering what the episode as a whole has to say about worship. Whilst the synoptic accounts differ in detail[3] they nevertheless share a thematic unity. They agree that in the encounter between Jesus, Moses and Elijah, the arrival, and departure, of the cloud, and through the heavenly voice, the three disciples were given a staggering glimpse of the divine *glory* (implied by Matthew and Mark, and explicitly stated by Luke).

As eye-witnesses, Peter and his companions would have been well aware of the Jewish traditions of theophany and the symbolic significance of the *kabod* (Heb.) of YHWH in the history of God's people: in the wilderness (Exod. 16:7,10); filling the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-5); at the hour of sacrifice (Lev. 9:6,23); and in the visions (Ezek. 1:28) and doctrine (Isa. 40:4-5, 60:1-3) of the prophets.[4] Yet throughout the turbulent history of Israel there had always been a contrast, a tension, between a God who seemed distant and far away and a God who was close-by or even in their midst (cf. Jer. 23:23).[5] Now, following the turbulent years of the ministry in Galilee – and as if underlining and expanding Peter's bold affirmation only a few days earlier that Jesus was the Messiah (Luke 9:20, cf. Matt. 17:16, Mark. 8:29) – the disciples' friend and leader was himself, incredibly, shining with this historical and enigmatic glory.

It has been said that the word 'glory' (Gr. *doxa*) encapsulates the doctrinal unity of the Creation, the Incarnation, the Cross, the Spirit, the Church, and the World-to-Come,[6] and indeed the word could be said to describe the whole of Jesus' life and thus the entire sweep of salvation history;[7] but how so specifically at the transfiguration? The heavenly voice, reminiscent of the voice at Jesus' Baptism (Matt. 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22) disclosed to the disciples that Jesus was God's Son and, and the use of 'beloved' (Matthew and Mark) and 'chosen' (Luke) also alluded to the imagery of Isaiah's servant.[8] The presence of Moses and especially Elijah had not been expected until the end of the world, and yet here they were on the mountaintop whilst Jesus was still alive, two eschatological paradigms and

3 For a comprehensive survey see W. L. Liefeld, 'Transfiguration'; in J. B. Green and S. McKnight eds, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1992, pp 834-8.

4 For overview see R. E. Nixon, 'Glory', in I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer and D. J. Wiseman eds, *New Bible Dictonary*, third edition, Inter-Varsity Press, 1996, pp 414f.

5 A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, Longmans, 1949, pp 21f.

6 Ramsey, *Glory*, p 5.

7 See J. A. Ziesler, 'The Transfiguration story and the Markan Soteriology'; in *The Expository Times*, 81 (1970), pp 263-8.

8 G. N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p 225.

two witnesses to the communion of saints.[9] The cloud, so often part of the *kabod* encounters, alluded both to the coming of the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13) and the ascension (Acts 1:10). Luke's additional reference to 'two men' connected the transfiguration to his account of the empty tomb (2:44, cf. John 21:12) and, again, to the ascension. The theophany of the transfiguration therefore provided a glimpse of the coming Kingdom[10] and a foretaste of Jesus' exaltation, as the risen, ascended, glorified (and so vindicated) Lord of the universe.

Nevertheless the transfiguration also pointed to Jesus' imminent suffering and, in this sense, the present was equated with the future. By mentioning the passing of time, the synoptists all connect the (temporarily) glorified Jesus of Nazareth with his prediction made only a few days earlier that he must suffer and die before being resurrected (Matt. 16:21, Mark 8:31, Luke 9:22) and that his followers must suffer with him.[11] Accordingly the transfiguration brought together the *theologia crucis* and the *theologia gloriae*[12] and showed the Father's approval of the step Jesus was about to take for the love of creation. The tensions within divine glory were never more apparent: as has been tellingly observed, the transfiguring on the mount predicted and assented to the disfiguring on the hill,[13] announcing that someday 'it would be known that the glory is not in spite of the suffering and death, but in its very midst'.[14]

So much more could be said but for my purposes here Michael Ramsey's rich synthesis is enough:

> Here we perceive that the living and the dead are one in Christ, that the old covenant and the new covenant are inseparable, that the Cross and glory are of one, that the age to come is already here, that our human nature has a destiny of glory, that in Christ the final word is uttered and in Him alone the Father is well pleased.[15]

In short, the transfiguration shows the Church the identity and incomparable glory of the God it worships. Like St Francis of Assisi, who asked 'Who are you, my dearest God? And what am I?',[16] the worshipping Church must allow God to set the agenda, to define himself in his own way as he did through the transfigured Jesus and as he has continued to do through throughout the history of the Church. Only in this way can the Father be truly worshipped through the Son and in the Spirit's power by a Church which responds in faith and strives to reflect trinitarian relationships in its mission and structures.

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9 Although of course traditionally viewed as collectively representing the law and the prophets, Moses and Elijah have also been ascribed individual roles in the transfiguration episode, respectively – as Jesus' predecessor and precursor (cf. Mal. 4:4-5) – Ramsey, *Glory*, p 114.

10 M. S. Augsburger, *Matthew – The Communicator's Commentary*, Word. Publishing, 1967, p 209.

11 This is eloquently presented by G. B. Caird, 'Expository Problems: The Transfiguration', in *The Expository Times* 67.

12 R. T. France, *Matthew – Revised Edition Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1985, p 262.

13 The observation of the seventeenth century Bishop, Joseph Hall, cited by Ramsey, *Glory*, p 141, and C. Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy. Worshipping the Trinitarian God*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997, p 138.

14 Ramsey, *Be Still*, p 62.

15 Ramsey, *Glory*, p 144.

16 Cocksworth, *Holy*, pp 3f.

As the transfigured Jesus prompted a response from the disciples on the mountain top, he continues to demand a worshipping response from his Church. So far as the transfiguration accounts are concerned, two basic categories emerge: what we learn about the Church's worship from Jesus, and what we learn from Peter and the disciples.

Revelation of the identity and experience of Jesus

To begin with *Jesus' identity,* as revealed in the transfiguration, can be seen to have implications for the Church's worship. Neither a heavenly visitor nor a favoured human mystic, Christ is only worshipped intelligently when he is recognised as the one sent to redeem the world.[17] Of the transfiguration accounts, Luke's in particular brings out the redemptive nature of Jesus' work through the unique description of the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah, in which the impending departure (exodus) to Jerusalem quietly resonates with the departure (exodus) from Egypt; but the pertinent issue here is that the Israelites' escape and freedom was in order that they could worship (Exod. 8:1). The lesson for the Church is that salvation expresses itself in worship.[18]

Yet as the voice from the cloud of transfiguration made clear, the Church's worshipping response should go beyond recognition, to listen and to follow *Jesus' example* in faith and obedience.[19] Doubtless the Church's calling, and that of every disciple, is to worship; equally worship may lead the Church to discover its calling to discipleship. Thus in following Christ's example, the Church is most likely to be transformed when it seeks God in prayer, possibly bringing urgent petitions, but ultimately in learning to submit to the Father's will – as Jesus demonstrated in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:39-46). We don't know whether on the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus' prayer expressed similar agony and conflict, although he knew he was approaching his destiny in Jerusalem, but it was nevertheless in praying that he approached his Father and was drawn into divine radiance.[20]

This is not to suggest that the primary purpose of Christian prayer and worship is to experience God's glory for ourselves, rather that we come to a place where God meets with us on his terms, transforms us, and so enables us to listen or (as old-fashioned language would have it) hearken to him. Only then can we receive the gift of worship, the Church joining in the prayer and praise of Christ. Many would say that in this respect the churches of the West have much to learn from those of the East.[21]

Jesus' experience also prompts us to ask who worship is for. Of course it impacted dramatically upon the disciples, but it is important to observe that it was also a powerful and transformational encounter for Jesus himself, and one which

17 L. W. Hurtado, *Mark – New International Biblical Commentary,* Paternoster Press, 1995, p 146.

18 Cocksworth, *Holy,* pp 12f.

19 J. Nolland, Luke 9:5-18:34 – *Word Biblical Commentary,* Word Books, 1993, p 490, R. Marshall, *The Transfiguration of Jesus,* Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994, p 80, and elsewhere.

20 Ramsey, *Be Still,* pp 64f.

21 For example, R. Marshall, *Transfiguration,* p 4.

occurred at a critical moment in his life, as he began to anticipate his passion and death.[22] It confirmed him in his ministry and strengthened him for what was to come – to some extent, the disciples were simply 'grafted in' at a later stage.[23] In terms of the lesson for the Church's worship, it might therefore be said that divine glory is most usually revealed at those times and occasions which are most significant to God.[24] That is what makes it significant for the Church and therefore what squares with the basic but often forgotten maxim that worship is not about what we do for God but what God does for his people.[25]

Revelation about the Church's worship

In isolation, *Peter's address of Jesus* – in two of the three gospels merely as 'teacher' – was at best inadequate.[26] Much of the worship of the Church throughout the ages will have been likewise. We have failed to understand who it is that we are addressing and employed inadequate and inappropriate language. Yet at the transfiguration the *kabod* was overwhelming, the disciples exhausted and fearful. Today our exhaustion and fear can equally affect the worship. So often, human frailty and lack of faith stand in the way of an appropriate response to God.[27] His royal presence is not always transparent and shining but sometimes seems to be dark and mysterious, as if in or behind the cloud.[28] By contrast, on those occasions when the presence of God is blinding and overwhelming, either individuals cannot cope or the Church as a whole does not know how to respond. Only God can make sense of experiences which are humanly inexplicable[29] and it is a sign of grace that he answers at all. As Jesus' own example shows, it is therefore all the more crucial that the Church listens to its God as it worships and learns.

Moving on, a further clue comes from *Peter's desire to preserve the scene* by building three tents. It stems from his failure to understand who Jesus was and reveals a tendency to restrict or constrain God's presence, in this instance with human-made constructions. It might be stating the obvious that this tendency has frequently been shared by a Church which does not always appreciate the thin line between a place of worship erected to the glory of God, and a place being enshrined where God or one of the saints is said to visit and where particular miracles are performed; but it may be less obvious that on occasions other structures (for example synods, prayer books, clerical orders) can be vehicles for our attempts to control the Holy Spirit. Many other examples could be added but the lesson here for the Church in worship is clear; that God meets with his people where and how he chooses, and that his presence is beyond comprehension, constraint or manipulation.

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22 Caird, p 291, and L. Morris, *Luke – Revised Edition Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1968, p 188.
23 Nolland, pp 496f.
24 Liefeld, p 835.
25 I. H. Marshall, 'Worship'; in *NBD*, Third Edition, Inter-Varsity Press, 1996, p 1250.
26 M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark – Black's New Testament Commentaries*, A & C Black, 1991, p 217. Incidentally, Peter addresses Jesus, but is answered by God – Nolland, p 497.
27 Nolland, p 504, and R. Marshall, p 87.
28 R. E. Nixon, 'Transfiguration', in *NBD*, p 1200.
29 Nolland, p 492.

Of course the desire to remain in the presence of glory may only be natural, but it ignores the need to return to the relative mundanities of life and to places of suffering[30] (where, the transfiguration teaches, glory may be less easily recognised but no less present[31]). There are *further lessons from Peter:* first, that 'extraordinary' experiences of God may be more common than many in the Church would like to think, but they remain relatively few compared to instances of dutiful and 'ordinary' worship;[32] second, that encountering the risen Christ in worship equips the Church for God's task of ministry[33] and enables the Church to grow in understanding and love; and third, that worship also gives the Church the confidence that in its weakness it and all of creation will be transformed.

Further, this private encounter in worship underpinned the public ministry of *the disciples as founding apostles* (cf. 2 Pet. 1:16-18).[34] Whilst it is no less true of the laity, the Church's clergy must understand the continuing need for faithful private devotions as the basis for their role within the Church. Genuine, honest worship which engages with God will feed not just the Church's inner life but also its evangelism and pastoral care as transformation takes place in the heart of each Christian and in the soul of the Church (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18).

Finally, the jewel of the transfiguration reflects the light of Christ into other areas of the Church's worship, with implications that can only be noted here. For example: the transfiguration underlines the trinitarian nature of true worship: the cloud points to the glory of the Father, the brilliance of Jesus' appearance to the glory of the Son, and the voice from heaven to the Holy Spirit's work in sharing their glory;[35] and so for the worshipping Church the transfiguration becomes a '...source for our hope that our personal suffering and the suffering of the cosmos will be transfigured by the power of the Spirit into the glory of God';[36] although implicit in much of the previous section, it is helpful to note explicitly the connection seen in the transfiguration accounts between worship and revelation; in other words, through transformational worship the Church is enabled by the Spirit to receive divine revelation[37] which as Peter, James and John discovered may be overwhelming, frightening, or confusing, yet encourage and inspire them for years to come; and in pointing to the eschatological Christ, the transfiguration also tells the Church that worship should be joyful, as the Church wonders at, revels in and shares with others the love and the ultimate victory of God.[38]

My hope is that the glorious and fascinating episode of the transfiguration of Jesus will be given greater attention by theologians and worshippers alike. I also

30 Nolland, p 502. The seminal 'The Mount and the Plain' sets this out with simple clarity – see Ramsey, *Be Still,* p 61-70.

31 Kevin Mills' poem 'Transfiguration' (cited in R. Marshall, p 7) juxtaposes 'Days all sun-steeped and glorious' with 'days all dark-drenched and aching' thereby hoping for a '... bringing together of my days'.

32 R. Marshall, p 77.

33 France, p 263.

34 Hooker, p 215.

35 Cocksworth, pp 127-44.

36 J. E. Griffiss, in J. E. Griffiss ed., *To Believe Is To Pray, ' Readings From Michael Ramsey,* Cowley Publications, 1996, pp 134f.

37 Cocksworth, p 15.

38 R. Marshall, and Cocksworth, p 52.

hope that in some small way I may have shown that even those difficult and less accessible episodes in the life of Christ can be opened up to be appreciated by the whole Church. Indeed *why not* make the transfiguration the subject of a congregational or smaller group retreat? As Christians better understand this neglected episode, this hidden treasure, we will find our thinking transformed and our worship of God enriched. As Iranaeus said 'The glory of God is a person fully alive, and the life of humanity is to see God.'[39]

For person, read Church?

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39 Cited in Cocksworth, p 145, and engraved on Ramsey's memorial stone in Canterbury Cathedral.

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