

## Transfiguration and Transformation

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

### Introduction

Today we have had two readings about mountain-top experiences: one about Moses and one about Jesus. There's a lot of theology in there, but today we are going to focus on one aspect – transfiguration. In our reading from Matthew Jesus is revealed in all his glory as who he really is – the beloved Son of God, the one we need to listen to. What fascinates me about this word 'transfiguration' is the fact that elsewhere in the NT the same Greek verb 'metamorpho' (as in our word metamorphosis) is translated as 'transform' and applied to us as followers of Jesus:

### Transfiguration and Transformation

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul says: "And we all, who with unveiled faces, contemplate or reflect the Lord's glory, **are being transformed into his image** with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." There is the same linking of transformation and glory.

This also reminds us, doesn't it, of Romans 8:29-30:

"For those God foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also **glorified**."

It is also the same word Paul uses in Romans 12:2:

"Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be **transformed** (a command) by the renewing of your mind."

All of these passages suggest that something should be going on in our lives – we should be being transformed and becoming more like Jesus.

It's a challenge. Mountain-top experiences are great and, like Peter, we would like to put up some shelters and stay for a bit longer, but sooner or later we have to come back down the mountain and face the nitty-gritty of life. Moses had to deal with the incident of the golden calf, and Jesus was called on to heal a demon-possessed boy. For us Sunday mornings may be great but what about Monday morning and the rest of the week? How consistent are we in living out our Christian faith on a day to day basis?

I remember reading a story told by a well-known American pastor. He was putting up a fence and his young son was watching. Suddenly the hammer slipped and hit his thumb – I'm sure you can guess what happened next. As he tells the story he was not sure who was more surprised at the words that came out of his mouth, his son or himself! What is likely to come out of us when the unexpected happens? We are like glasses on a tray – what spills out when we are jostled? What spills out is our character; our inner and habitual way of being.

It's the human equivalent of a stick of rock. I don't know whether you have this in NZ but in the UK this seaside favourite is a long, peppermint-flavoured piece of candy that has the name of the town not only on the outside but running all the way through it. In the same way character is a pattern of thinking and acting that runs right through someone, it's always there no matter what the circumstances.

But how do we develop a Christian character; how do we consistently behave in a 'Christian' way? Is it something that happens automatically when we become Christians? – No, it is something we have to work at. Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12-13:

“ ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” That purpose includes our transformation.

God is at work in us – we are not talking about earning our salvation, our place in the world to come, by our own efforts. We know we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8) and everything we say this morning has to be in that context. Indeed, that has to be the starting place, for unless we have been born again, set free from the guilt and power of sin, and have Christ living in us through His Holy Spirit we are not able to change from being slaves to sin to being free to live God's way (see Romans 6:1-18).

And God is continuing to work in us through His in-dwelling Holy Spirit. (For those of you who like theological terms it is part of the process of sanctification). But we are also to work out our own salvation – work out in the sense of working on a project that is on-going but has a completion in view. We are a work in progress.

But how do we work at becoming more like Christ? Is it a matter of keeping a set of rules? No, rules are important but it has to be more than that. It involves something deeper. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Traditionally this has been a time of reflection and

self-examination, a reality check, a time to take stock of our lives. This year during Lent we are going to use the lectionary readings that follow Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, to the cross and resurrection that stand at the heart of our faith and we are also going to focus on how we can develop a more Christ-like character by using an ancient tradition – the tradition of the virtues, sometimes referred to nowadays as virtue ethics.

### **The Tradition of the Virtues**

The Tradition of the Virtues was developed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle about 300 years before Jesus was born. He wanted to produce men of good character who would be interested not only in their own well-being but also the good of the city. He thought this could be done by encouraging people to develop certain good character traits, the virtues, and to avoid any undesirable behaviours or vices. Aristotle recognized that we are not born with these virtues but we can be taught about them and can gradually acquire them by repeated virtuous actions. These become habits and eventually we become people of good character. Some of you may know the saying:

“Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny.” It’s the same sort of idea.

It’s an idea that has a lot going for it. Remember the plane that landed safely on the Hudson River? On Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009 an Airbus A320 took off from LaGuardia Airport, New York. But 2 minutes after take-off the plane flew into a flock of Canada Geese and lost power in both engines. The pilot and co-pilot had to make several major decisions instantly if they were going to save the lives not only of the people on the plane, but also those on the ground for they were heading for one of the most densely populated parts of the city. Quickly discounting all the other options, they decided to attempt to crash-land on the Hudson River, a notoriously difficult operation that could have seen the plane break up and sink in the freezing water. They had only 2-3 minutes to complete all their preparations and calculations, to make a fast left turn so the plane was in line with the flow of the river, and then straighten out again and glide down. Yet they did it, with everyone escaping safely! They did not have time to consult manuals; they had to act instinctively using all their skills and experience. And this is the point, - the captain had not been born with those abilities, he had to acquire them through training and repeated practice. This is what lies behind the tradition of the virtues: repeated actions become habits, habitual ways of behaving and gradually our character is transformed.

## **Tradition of the Virtues and the New Testament**

But how does all this fit with what we find in the NT. Certainly there had to be a totally new focus and a new goal: to be conformed to Christ, or as Paul puts it in Philippians to “have the mind of Christ.” Jesus’ example of self-giving love and obedience to the Father, of humility and forgiveness would have been totally rejected by the Roman-Greek culture of the day. But, on the other hand, Paul is quite clear that there are some behaviours we must reject, what we might call the vices, and some, the virtues, we must definitely go for.

In Galatians 5, Paul contrasts the acts of the flesh (sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God) with the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). Galatians 5:19-23).

Elsewhere Paul describes it as putting to death, getting rid of, or putting off one way of behaving and putting on another. In Colossians 3:1-14 he says:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.** For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

**Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.** Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now **you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self,** which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Therefore, **as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another** if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.**

Tom Wright in his book *Virtue Reborn* stresses the fact that this doesn't happen automatically just because we have been converted, come to church, say our prayers or whatever (though of course those things are important). Sooner or later, he says, each individual Christian must make the key choices to 'put on' the things which reflect the life we have already been given in Christ. And, having made these key choices, each Christian must acquire the habit of making them over and over again. Putting off and putting on is a matter of consciously deciding, again and again, to do certain things in certain ways, creating patterns deep within our brain. As he says, clothes don't just fall out of the wardrobe and put themselves on you – you have to make a conscious decision what to wear, every day, as each one of us did when we got up this morning.

Everyone, all Christians, have to make these choices as the Holy Spirit continues to work to remake us in God's image, (Genesis 1:26) so that we can take up the role assigned to us as the people of God. You see the call to live a virtuous life, to become like Christ is not for our own personal benefit but is part of our calling as a church to worship and mission. We are to be like an angled mirror that reflects the world to God in worship, and God to the world in mission. It is as we become more like Christ that we are more able to act as his representatives bringing God's justice, freedom, peace and above all his love to the world around us. To be salt and light in the world.

### **The Christian tradition of the virtues and the Lent course**

So, how can we put this into practice? How can we use the tradition of the virtues to help us develop characters that are more consistent and Christ-like? One of the ways the early church used was self-examination. Way back in the Psalms David said, "Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my (anxious) thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24). That is what we want to do this Lent. We are not doing this so that we can beat ourselves up, or become spiritual hypochondriacs but so that we can grow in our Christian lives and become more like Christ.

We are going to use a pattern that was first used by monks in the Egyptian desert but, don't worry, we are going to use an up-dated 21<sup>st</sup> Century version. It focuses mainly on the things to avoid, the vices, which over the years have become known as the Seven Deadly Sins and then, most importantly, their remedies, or corresponding virtues. It may all sound a bit off-putting but actually it is very insightful and throws

fresh light on what makes us behave the way we do and what we can do about it. So over the next few weeks we are going to look at Envy, Avarice (or Greed), Lust, Sloth (which is not quite what you think it is), Anger, Gluttony and Vainglory. They are called deadly sins not because they are the worst sins but because they can give rise to a whole lot more associated sins. One very obvious sin is not on our list – that is pride. That is because pride is seen as the root of them all. So we can picture them like a tree. Pride is the root; the seven deadly sins are the branches; and they produce clusters of poisonous fruits. Often we start with the fruit. We are worried about a particular sin or weakness that keeps tripping us up again and again, even though we have confessed it and done our best to fight against it. The virtues tradition helps us identify it and to trace it back to its root so we can deal with it at a deeper level.

Pride is seen as the root because we set ourselves up in place of God. The vices are all ways of seeking our own way of happiness or fulfilment. We set ourselves up as the judge of what is good for us rather than following God's way. We may be acting out of arrogance, wanting to be self-sufficient, or out of fear, not trusting God to provide for us. Avarice, for example, is not trusting God to provide and grabbing what we can while we can.

Once we recognize the vices for what they are, attempts to fill the empty place inside of us that only God can fill, then we can be freed up so that we can put them off, and instead put on those things that will enable us to become more like Christ.

So, this morning we began by looking at Christ's transfiguration which revealed his glory, who he really is. We saw too that we are also called to be transformed, to become like Christ, through God at work in us and through our own repeated choices.

Last week Owen was challenging us to live in such a way that people around us will see the difference it makes having Christ live in us. Let's use this time during Lent to take a close look at ourselves through the vices and virtues tradition so that we can become, with the help of the indwelling Spirit, the transformed people God wants us to be. Amen.