

The Mystery of the Transfiguration: Seven Meditations

by

Dean Eric Symes Abbott

published by

The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund

May 2006

The Mystery of the Transfiguration: Seven Meditations



Dean Eric Symes Abbott

The Mystery of the Transfiguration: Seven Meditations

by

Dean Eric Symes Abbott

published by

The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund

May 2006

Dean Eric Symes Abbott (1906-1983) held, among other posts, those of Warden of Lincoln Theological College, Dean of King's College London, Warden of Keble College Oxford, and Dean of Westminster. On his death, the Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund was endowed by his friends to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality and pastoral theology. The lectures are given in both London and Oxford (and formerly in Lincoln); the Twenty-first Lecture was delivered in May 2006 by the Very Revd Vivienne Faull, Dean of Leicester.

The Meditations here reproduced were first published in 1979, although they were originally delivered in the late 1940s. To mark Dr Abbott's centenary, the Memorial Fund Committee felt that it would be appropriate to reprint them for a new audience.

The members of the Memorial Fund Committee are: the Dean of King's College London (Chairman); the Dean of Westminster; the Warden of Keble College, Oxford; the Reverend John Robson; and the Reverend Canon Eric James.

© 2006 The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Fund

c/o The Dean's Office
King's College London
WC2R 2LS

Tel: 020 7848 2333
Fax: 020 7848 2344
Email: dean@kcl.ac.uk

The Mystery of the Transfiguration: Seven Meditations

I

‘Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves’ (Mark 9:2).

This is the divine initiative – in all our life, in all our prayer. It is prevenient grace. It is the priority of God’s action. ‘We love him because he first loved us’ (1 John 4:19). It is the divine initiative moving always towards union, towards the shared experience.

Note the little word ‘with’ – ‘we are buried with him by baptism into death’; ‘we are raised with him’; ‘we suffer with him’; ‘we reign with him’; ‘we are glorified with him’; ‘we live with him’; ‘Jesus taketh with him...’ So when ‘Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James and John’ it is the first upward movement not only towards his own transfiguration but towards their ultimate transfiguration as well. It is the first promise that the transfigured Jesus is also the transfiguring Jesus. ‘The Lord Jesus Christ shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself’ (Phil. 3:20-21). ‘Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2).

‘We shall be like him... We shall see him as he is.’ These two statements are most intimately linked, for we grow into the likeness of that at which we lovingly gaze. (The Curé d’Ars used to lean over his pulpit and say over and over again, ‘We shall see

him.’) At the Transfiguration they saw him as he was. They were ‘eye witnesses of his majesty’ (2 Pet. 1:16).

‘Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James and John...’ Here is friendship – ‘first that which is natural’. Here is election – that mystery of all history – the chosen few; election of responsibility; ‘you only have I known of all the peoples of the earth: you therefore I will punish’ (Amos 3:2). Here is apostleship and training – something which they must wait to speak about till the Son of Man is risen from the dead. So it isn’t simply Tom, Dick and Harry – even though Tom, Dick and Harry may and do have various transfiguring experiences, of which the greatest is love, which is rooted in the divine creation of man. They are apostles. It is therefore the beginning of the promise to transfigure Israel, to transfigure the people of God, to transfigure the Church. Be quite sure that God will never fail to go on, through history to the end, taking the Church up into the place of transfiguration, just as he also takes the Church with him into Gethsemane; and in both places Jesus is the praying Christ, and in both places Peter, and James and John, are first asleep and then awake.

‘He taketh them up into a high mountain...’ This is the constant theme of ascending whence, first, the Redeemer has come down. He lifts up human nature (‘not by conversion of Godhead into flesh but by taking manhood into God’). Prayer is the ‘ascent of the mind unto God’. ‘Lift up your hearts’ – *sursum corda* – is the very earliest liturgical form. It is the proper view (and hence the proportion of things) which you get from the high mountain. But it is a high mountain.

‘Apart by themselves...’ This is an essential note. ‘Come ye apart...’ – not to sleep, but to be awake to the majesty of his glory. For even as he ‘went up into a mountain to pray’, so now we come apart to pray.

Vouchsafe to bring us, by thy grace,
To see thy glory face to face.

II

‘And as he prayed the fashion of his countenance was altered.’

The Transfiguration is the feast of the praying Christ. In his prayer he entered into his glory. ‘His face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light’ (Matt. 17:2). What sort of prayer what it? We can only answer: the prayer of union, in which the Father blesses the Son, blesses and assures him with glory. The glory is the blessing and the assurance.

Our Lord’s prayer to the Father was mind to mind, heart to heart, and will to will. Here in the Transfiguration is his being at one with the Father. Our Lord prays in John 17:6: ‘Glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.’ George Macdonald wrote: ‘When he died on the Cross he did that, in the wild weather of his outlying provinces, which he had done at home in glory and gladness.’ He entered into his glory so that it was visible to men.

Late on, the gospel makes us see the glory of the cross. In the end we are led to discern the glory everywhere, because it is in fact by the glory of God that we are surrounded, though discerned by faith. And we know how the Transfiguration is related to what he is going to do, to the things he must suffer. But before the Transfiguration relates to his doing, it relates to his being. The glory is always there, but there is the absolute incognito – he ‘took the form of a slave’; there was ‘no beauty that we should desire him’ until, before these ‘eye witnesses of his majesty’, the glory

flashes out. The meaning of it is seen in the crucifixion – the ‘exodus’ – and the resurrection. Transfiguration holds out the hope, the goal; but the way to it is by that radical transforming process which is represented by the cross and resurrection. We are not saved simply by ‘illumination’. The way to union includes purgation. The most obvious act towards which the Transfiguration moves us is to look. (To look, even if we do not wholly see.) Look, says the Transfiguration, at what has come to pass. God has given us ‘the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ’. When we close our eyes and try to ‘see Jesus’, what really happens is that we see the correspondence between ourselves and the perfect image of God. His is the face of the ‘proper man’ – to use Martin Luther’s great phrase in *Ein’ Feste Burg*. (‘I never set eyes on your face before’, says the blind man to Jesus, who has just restored his sight in Dorothy Sayers’ *The Man Born to be King*. ‘Faces mean nothing to me. But you look the way you ought to look if you’re the man I take you for.’) But now when we see him as he is there have to be the wounds the ‘glorious scars’.

There is no final contradiction between the Transfiguration and the day of the Holy Cross; and when we shall see him as he is, though then his countenance will be ‘as the sun shineth in his strength’ (Rev 1:16), the way taken on earth has been transfiguration, disfiguration, resurrection, ascension. He wills us to see his glory from beginning to end – glory of nativity, epiphany, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, glory of his members at Pentecost. But there is no sure way of beholding this glory of the one Christ except the way of faith.

‘Thee we adore, O *hidden* Saviour thee.’ ‘Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself.’ But in the glorious mystery of the Transfiguration the Saviour’s hidden glory – the glory he had with

the Father before all worlds – stands revealed upon the holy mount.

What are the consequences of seeing his glory? First: we see the restoration of humanity – and nothing is more necessary nowadays. Second: we see the glad union of nature and super-nature; the creative power of God pierces and purifies and transforms the actual creation. Third: we see the meaning of St Augustine’s words concerning the Eucharist: ‘Thou wilt not change me into thyself: it is thou who wilt be transformed into me.’ Fourth: concerning the Church which is his Body, ‘This is my beloved Son’ becomes ‘This is my beloved Church’. Finally: seeing his glory encourages us to contemplate.

III

*‘There talked with him. Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory’
(Luke 9:30-31).*

There is just that bit of danger in the joyful mystery of the Transfiguration – that we love this glory more than the glory, perceived by faith, of the disfiguration of the cross; that we contrast the two glories so as to divide rather than unite them; that we make the Transfiguration into a momentary escape from the toils and sufferings of the plain, instead of a glory which is given and received in the midst of the toils and sufferings, the mountain of vision rising out of the plain. In this way the sufferings of the present time are not forgotten on the mount but are actually the subject of heavenly converse – for they spoke of ‘the decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem’.

‘I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us’, wrote St Paul in the Eighth Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. ‘For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.’ But in the Transfiguration the glory has been revealed in us, in the very midst of the sufferings, and the Son of God has been manifested, so that we also may be sons, transfigured, changed from glory to glory. In that same eighth chapter of Romans what we are waiting for is described as ‘adoption’ and further defined as ‘the redemption of the body’. The Transfiguration is the earnest, the promise, of the redemption of our body and of the whole of nature.

‘There talked with him Moses and Elijah...’ Viewing the mystery from the side of our Lord, we may venture to say that ‘as he prayed’ he was meditating upon the suffering and glory of the lives of Moses and Elijah. Concerning the suffering of Moses, the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:24-27) says: (a) He chose to suffer affliction with the people of God; (b) He esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; (c) He did not fear the wrath of the king; (d) He endured as seeing him who is invisible. In the case of our Lord, how much more!

Concerning the suffering of Elijah, the First Book of Kings (chapters 18 and 19) states: (a) He is the ‘troubler of Israel’; (b) He says, ‘I, even I, only, remain’; (c) He says, ‘O Lord, take away my like’; (d) He says, ‘They seek my life, to take it away.’ Jesus is uniquely the troubler – as also the Saviour – of Israel. He is left alone, except that he adds, ‘yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me’. He knows that the Son of Man must suffer and tells his disciples that his enemies will kill him.

Moses has been granted a kind of transfiguration experience, a momentary and partial glimpse of the great glory. His face had

shone; the veil had had to be over it for the children of Israel to bear it. Elijah also had a kind of transfiguration experience. He stood on the mount before the Lord, and there he was told what to do. Again, the deaths of Moses and Elijah were surrounded by a mysterious glory. In Moses and Elijah talking with him, Jesus received the divine assurance that the final glory could only be won in suffering, and that in that suffering he would be glorified. 'I am come forth from the Father and am come into the world; again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.' Not by transfiguration, but by suffering, death and resurrection.

If we take Moses and Elijah for our examples and apply them to our own vocations, the comments of the Epistle to the Hebrews on Moses are the very faith we require and can ask for. Elijah, in his wilderness depression, represents the natural man in us; his fear, discouragement and loneliness. But he is able to hear the still, small voice and is sent back to anoint a couple of kings and his own successor! Moses and Elijah appeared 'in glory'. The sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us; and their sufferings are taken up into the eternal realm where also the sufferings of Christ are taken up, for the centre of heaven is the Lamb as it had been slain. 'If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.' Let, therefore, this consideration of Moses and Elijah in our Lord's Transfiguration empower and cheer us for our vocation and give us an interpretation of it.

IV

'And spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem' (Luke 9:31).

This is the only place in the Gospels where the Greek word *exodos* is used for death. Christopher Wordsworth writes:

Thus St. Luke appears to suggest that the death of Christ was the great moral and spiritual End to what the Law and the Prophets, represented by Moses and Elijah, looked...Did not the Holy Spirit thereby intend us to infer that the Exodus, which was begun by Israel at the Red Sea, was accomplished by Christ at Jerusalem?...Did he not intend us to bear in mind what was taught us by St Paul, that Christ's Exodus is the substance of which Israel's Exodus was the shadow; that Christ is the true Passover?

The Exodus was the great redemptive act of God for his people, but it was something more. It was the type and figure of the greatest event the world has ever seen: a preparation for an event which concerns all mankind until the end of time and through the countless ages of eternity; the type of figure of the world's Exodus: of mankind's deliverance by the death and passion of him who is no other than the Lord Jehovah himself, who took our nature and became incarnate; who passed through the Red Sea of his own passion and overwhelmed Satan in its abysses; who marched through that sea, and carried the world with him, and led it forth in triumph from the house of spiritual bondage – from the Egypt of Satan, sin and death – and conducted it in a glorious career towards the Canann of its heavenly rest.

The Holy Spirit in the New Testament teaches us to regard the Exodus in this light. He teaches us that Israel was a figure of Christ, and that all things in the Exodus of Israel were figures of us; that they were figures of Christ's Church, whose members are united together under him

their Head, who had engrafted them into his own body and has made them partakers of his own death and resurrection by the sacrament of baptism, which was foreshadowed by the passage of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea. Israel's Exodus was Christ's Exodus. (*Commentary on Pentateuch p.20*)

Such is the rich content of meaning which we may perceive in this word 'exodus'. And this 'exodus' he is going to *accomplish*. It won't simply come. He will achieve it. That is why he can say at the end, *consummatum est*: 'It is finished'. And the death is going to be at Jerusalem. Nowhere else. Jerusalem which stones the prophets who are sent to her. 'It cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem' (Luke 13:33). 'He came unto his own, and his own received him not' (John 1:11). 'And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends' (Zech. 13:6).

The application of this to ourselves is a double challenge of the word 'exodus'. It is liberation *and* death. The Exodus was a historical setting free. Ask about your own liberation, your own interior freedom, through faith. (A good test of liberation is joy.) But by the grace of God I have also to achieve, accomplish, a real death – to this and that, and finally to self. Fullness of liberation will then be known. It will be the power of the resurrection in me. What death to self ought I to accomplish?

Finally, the death of our Lord accomplished at Jerusalem means that probably the real enemies are within the gates. Being wounded in the house of our friends seems so topsy turvy; but it is only an extension of the fact that in the life of the individual soul 'Ye are bidden to fight with your own selves...' We tend to think that the chief sufferings should be those inflicted by the world

upon the Church. Those sufferings are easy to bear compared with what tends to come upon us with greater force: the sufferings which we bear as Christians within the Church. These come because the Church is the place where the tensions of human life have to be resolved at the deepest level, and peace only comes at extreme cost: 'He made peace by the blood on his Cross' (Col 1:20). It is necessary for the Holy Spirit to speak to us often of the necessity of the death which we are to accomplish at Jerusalem.

V

'But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him' (Luke 9:32). 'They were sore afraid' (Mark 9:6).

Withdrawn in distance Jesus was not. Withdrawn in another sense he was. The distance which separates us from God, because he is infinite and we are finite, is less than the distance which separates us from God because he is holy and we are sinful. This is the emphasis of the biblical writers, whereas for the philosophers it is the other way round. It is one of the insights of the men of the Bible that no man can see God and live. No wonder the reaction of the disciples was terror. It would be a mistaken pictorial representation which showed three men wrapped in adoring wonder of Jesus in glory. The symbolic representation of the ikon is correct: the disciples were completely *bouleversés*.

There are hints elsewhere in the Gospels of the disciples suddenly fearing Jesus. There is the incident in the story of the passion: 'Jesus, knowing all things that should come upon him, went forth, and said unto them, Whom seek ye? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus saith unto them, I am he... As soon

then as he had said unto them, I am he, they went backward, and fell to the ground' (John 18:4-6). Even on that night when he was being betrayed, they were eye witnesses of his majesty, and in his majesty he spoke the great I AM. If this was so in the darkness of the Passion, how much more in the brightness of the Transfiguration were the sons of men struck into fear.

They were sore afraid because a cloud overshadowed them, and they entered into the cloud. This is another word with both Old and New Testament allusions, and a great doctrinal meaning latent within it. We are not to think of a mist or a fog. The cloud is the glory, the Shekinah, that divine brilliance of uncreated light which is the very presence of the eternal and all-holy God. Our Lord was holding communion with that light at its very personal Source. And 'the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel' (Exod. 24:17). Moses had gone up, and a cloud covered the mount; and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. In later Old Testament history the cloud filled the house of the Lord. In the New Testament there is not only this cloud of Transfiguration glory, but also the cloud of the ascension when Christ returned to the glory of the heavenly places whence he had come.

The fear of the disciples is the fear of God in its highest sense: in which fear and awe are mingled with humble and adoring love and worship. This is the awe-full intimacy willed for us by our Lord, which we cannot bear – 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord' – because of the excess of light, that light which is holiness. The cloud is almost synonymous with the glory which is the very essential attribute of God. It was the heavenly light on earth: 'Heaven and earth are full of thy glory'. In this cloud, this glory, is our human nature which God took upon himself in Christ; and here is human nature in its act of perfect adoring response.

The chief end of man, ‘to glorify God and enjoy him for ever’, is here absolutely fulfilled in the transfigured Christ.

In the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus (John 17) Jesus prayed: ‘Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me before the foundation of the world’. The approach of God by man, before thought so impossible – for ‘he only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see’ (1 Tim. 6:16) – is made by Christ, in the prayer-union of the Transfiguration, by God to God and by man-in-God to God. The transfigured Christ in the glory of the cloud is also heaven on earth and eternity in time. The relation of time to eternity is personally shown: that time is in eternity; that this world, despite its darkness (which is of the wills of men) is in heaven. Let us steep and soak ourselves wordlessly in the sense of eternity by looking at Christ transfigured. Let us promise that space of time in which each day the remembrance of the transfigured Christ on earth will give us daily a fresh hold on the fact of eternity.

The sleep spoken of by St Luke may have been the stupor of amazement into which the disciples were struck by that excess of light which makes men as they look at Jesus, when they see him as he is – God from God, Light from Light – to be like bats looking at the sun. (At the sight of the majesty of one like unto the Son of Man St John the Divine fell at his feet as dead). We may think of their sleep as their life before conversion, *Sero te amavi*: ‘Too late have I loved thee.’ Yet all shall be well, for forgiveness means that God can make evil into an actual means of good. We may think of that stage of prayer in which we press against the dark cloud of the brightness of God’s being, in a way for ever classically expressed by *The Cloud of Unknowing*: ‘When they were awake, they saw

his glory.’ Let us ask to be awake, for the greatest awareness that is possible.

VI

‘Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. For he wist not what to say’ (Mark 9:5-6).

It is ‘good for us to be here’, because the Transfiguration lights up the essential meaning of human life and human nature; because the transfigured body of Christ is our theological and spiritual clue in the problems of faith and hope which are set us by the sufferings and chaos of the world. It is so good for us to be here that our best plan is to make three tabernacles.

The Greek word for ‘tabernacle’ means a bird’s nest, or a tent or both. And the regular comment on Peter’s remark has much truth in it: that he wanted to stay where he was; to remain in the vision; to be close to the glory. He did not relish the exchange of the plain for the mountain. Peter is not the only one who has wanted to ‘stay in the nest’. The light on the plain is a series of acts of trust, and no day can be got through without a vigorous proof of the practicality of faith as committal in trust. The Greek word for tent or booth comes from the nomadic days of Israel, when the people of God dwelt in tents. A tabernacle was therefore a moveable article, less static than it sounds. It contains the idea of progress and rest. But suppose that in this sudden and bewildered statement of Peter’s there is a suggestion of the Feast of Tabernacles, the connection in which the word would be most familiar to the Jew, how Peter’s remark is lit up. For the Feast of Tabernacles was the Feast of In-Gathering. What Peter had seen,

in a flash of faith, was the great in-gathering of the nations: the great Messianic hope purified of Jewish self-centredness. He foresaw that the kingdoms of the world would be or, rather, were the Kingdom of Christ. Whenever this vision is given, the perfect tense has to be used: 'The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ', not 'they will become' or 'they may become'.

Thus we are introduced at the Transfiguration to something vital to our faith: the distinction, and yet the link, between 'now' and 'not yet'. Peter, by faith, sees the in-gathering now; but we know that the in-gathering is not yet. The distinction runs through the Gospels: there is a time to be fulfilled, and before that time is 'not yet'. When the time was fulfilled Jesus 'came into Galilee preaching the kingdom of God'. He had a baptism to be baptized with – a cross to suffer – but 'My time is not yet to come'. When it is come: 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him.' But on a deeper level 'not yet' refers to the fulfilled purpose of God, which requires a new heaven and a new earth. Clearly Christ is not yet King, in the sense of being acknowledged as such. In this sense the Transfiguration itself is a palpable 'not yet'. Not yet was he returned to the Father. Not yet is the death, the Exodus, which has been the subject of the converse between him and Moses and Elijah. Not yet is that resurrection which will give him a glorified body, bearing forever the marks which are the credentials of the Redeemer. This 'not yet' derives not only from human imperfections but also from the very nature of human life in its necessary sequence of time, in which every generation has to learn the gospel afresh, and in which there may be a step back into barbarism if the gospel is rejected. But – in this sequence of time, in which by historical necessity nothing is complete, but everything is partial achievement, there is assurance – 'Let us make three tabernacles!' 'I have seen by faith the great in-gathering of the nations: they are become the kingdoms of our

Lord, and of his Christ.’ It is this assurance that is asserted in the word ‘now’.

This is the meaning of the miracles. All men are not yet healed; but this man is healed now. The Church is not yet perfect; but they are – at Pentecost – all filled with the Holy Ghost now. I am not yet made perfect; but I am ‘saved’ now. This is the gospel: though the Kingdom is not yet, it is present with power now. This is what we mean by the ‘sufficient success’ of the Church: that though the Kingdom tarries, it is incarnate, manifest, known to us in our experience now. Therefore ‘it is good for us to be here’: because in the Transfiguration the eternal is seen in its penetration into time now; and though all persons and all things are not transfigured, yet Christ being transfigured now is the earnest of all things, of the whole cosmos returned to glory. This leads us to proper hope and proper assurance. There is nothing escapist in this ‘not yet’ and ‘now’. When we are absolved we are in the heavens now – even though the struggle continues.

This leads to creative hope. You cannot see the Transfiguration fully – with its juxtaposition and union of the natural and the supernatural; the transcendent and the immanent; God in man and man in God; the heavenly and the earthly; other-worldliness and this-worldliness; eternity and time; the vision and the cross – without receiving creative hope. The Transfiguration is ‘now’; it is also ‘not yet’.

The Transfiguration, crucifixion and resurrection together make a completely realistic ‘Now’ and ‘Here’; but even they represent a ‘not yet’; for not yet is God all in all. The Transfiguration is a power of creative hope which ‘maketh not ashamed’. Some hopes – like Utopia – ‘make ashamed’. The Kingdom of God, built upon the incarnation, transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, does not make ashamed. It

is real. It takes account of everything in the heights and depths of human nature. So we live in the vision of the in-gathering, but in hope: between the beginning and the end – ‘in the beginning God’; in the End, God shall be all in all; ‘because the times’, which always a ‘not yet’, but always, in response to faith, a ‘now’, a present blessing, a present assurance.

We are isolated, unsuccessful; we get sorrowful about the Church. We feel that mankind is imprisoned in its own works. But we unite ourselves with the humiliated Jesus, knowing that the humiliated Jesus and the ascended Jesus are one Christ. And just when we think we are imprisoned in our own works, the Word of God breaks in; there is a fresh descent of the Dove, and creative possibilities are opened up.

‘Where, Lord?’ Here and there. Where there is faith. But ‘when the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?’ Shall he find Christians patient enough in the ambiguities of history, patient with the ‘not yet’ but sure of the ‘now’?

VII

‘And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying. This is my beloved Son; hear him’ (Luke 9:35). ‘They saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves’ (Mark 9:8).

The Transfiguration story ends with a direct command from the glory of the disciples – a statement of fact, and a command: ‘This is my beloved Son: hear him.’ How do they fare? Not very well just yet. The glory is not yet imparted to them. They have been afraid. They are commanded to silence. But they have seen, and they can remember. And then come all those terrible experiences,

from the Transfiguration to the day when our Lord went up the steeper hill of Calvary, until in the end his corpse is laid in the tomb.

It is our Lord's will to share his glory. It is he who, in the New Testament phrase, 'brings many sons to glory'; but, then and now, it is on the further side of the crucifixion that the glory is given and imparted. It was after the Cross, after Pentecost, after conversion that Stephen's face was seen 'as it had been the face of an angel' and that as he 'looked up steadfastly into heaven he saw the glory of God'.

The Transfiguration which we desire in not without pain and sweat. This change from glory to glory is through death, as we let ourselves go more and more. All that the Transfiguration has anticipated – for the Transfiguration is a great anticipation – is given to us in full measure when we have passed through our own (spiritual) grave and gate of death. We have to assume therefore a real conversion before we can be sure that the Transfiguration can be used for our soul's advance. But then, when it comes to us in our mind and memory, after Good Friday, and Easter, and Pentecost – as it remained in the memory of Peter, James and John, though they were not immediately partakers of the Transfiguration glory – it leads right on to the prayer of union; and, when combined with a lively trust in the Holy Spirit, it leads to the imparted likeness to our Lord which is God's will for us: an imparted likeness through contemplation. 'We shall be like him... we shall see him as he is... This is my beloved Son... These are my beloved sons.'

The Transfiguration is the promise of the family likeness in the household of God. We become like that which we love. We become like him whom we love. Because we are 'bound up in the bundle of life' with other men, this is the greatest thing we can do

for them: to be transfigured by the transfiguring Christ. Loving him, seeing him, hearing him, we become like him; as we pray, if we really believe in the Holy Spirit's power to make us what we are not, the fashion of our countenance is altered. In face alone St Paul noted something different in the expression of Christians, for they 'reflect as in a mirror the glory of the Lord'. And this is no superficial thing, for the natural self is being changed into the new spiritual self: 'as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly'. And this is no sentimental or emotional thing: 'Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind', says St Paul; and we may think thankfully how God has begun to do this already.

'This is my beloved Son: hear him.' He is God's beloved Son, by whose transfigured and risen body you are given your clue to life. Hear him, and by faith cleave to him, despite all difficulties. He is the beloved Son. We are God's sons in the Son. His Transfiguration means that it 'doth not yet appear what we shall be'.

'Hear him.' Our fundamental spiritual exercise is to practise his presence. 'They saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves.'