

Richmond Hill
Richmond, Virginia
7 March 2011
Last Sunday of Epiphany
Mathew 17:1-9
The Transfiguration
The Rev. B. P. Campbell

Jesus' Program of Transformation

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (*Matt 17:1-9*)

Tonight's Gospel is called the story of the Transfiguration. In most liturgical calendars of Christianity, this Gospel is read on the last Sunday in Epiphany, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent. The Feast of the Transfiguration, commemorating the same event is also celebrated on August 6 in the liturgical calendar.

In one of those obscurities by which Christianity seems determined to mask the meaning of its traditions, the word "Transfiguration" is still used in English to describe the event on the mountain which is the basis for tonight's celebration. But "transfiguration" is an archaic Latinized translation of the Greek word "metamorphosis," which is usually translated "transformation." Tonight's Gospel, therefore, is the story of the visual Transformation of Jesus before the eyes of three of his disciples – Peter, James, and John.

But far more important than this, it actually represents the introduction of the theme of Transformation into the history of Israel, and defines the theme of Transformation as the central program of Jesus' life and teaching for us.

Transformation is:

1. The spiritual pattern of Israel's history.
2. The pattern of Jesus' own life and ministry.
3. The pattern of our personal salvation.
4. The pattern of Richmond's history (and any other transformation we see in world history)

1. Transformation is the spiritual pattern of Israel's history.

The story of the Transfiguration occurs right after what we call the Confession at Caesarea Philippi. You will remember that Jesus and the disciples are walking on the road to Caesarea Philippi, in the extreme north of Israel, at the foot of the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon, which separate Israel from Lebanon and Syria. He asks them who they think he is. Peter says he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the king who is to bring God's kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Jesus seems to agree with him, and says that the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem, and encounter the Roman and Jewish authorities and elite, and suffer and be killed. Peter disagrees with him.

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, joined by the Zebedee brothers, up to a mountain, is transformed before them, and is seen to be standing with Moses and Elijah. A voice comes from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him."

The story for Peter, the story for Israel, the story for us, is that Jesus is now as authoritative as Moses and Elijah, and what he says is the new revelation – the third and crucial revelation. There is a pattern here, and this is the third and decisive message. First, Moses gave the Law – that is, he gave the principles of order, expanded to 613 Mitzvot in the Torah – which define proper order for human society. Second, Elijah and the prophets brought the criticism – showing the way in which Israel failed the Torah. And now Jesus, the Son, brings Transformation.

This third revelation, this Transformation, is not a static one-time event but a dynamic and continuing process, evolving out of the Law and the Prophets like a spark comes from the two filaments in an incandescent bulb.

Those who would look at the tradition would see the symmetry in this. Moses received the Law at Sinai, at a mountain in the extreme south of the land. Elijah himself hid in the cleft of that mountain. The Confession at Caesarea occurred at the foot of a mountain in the extreme north of the land, and the Transfiguration six days later was probably on the mountain itself. And the beginning of the Transformation occurred in Jerusalem, the mountain in the center.

Transformation is the spiritual pattern of Israel's history.

2. Transformation is the pattern of Jesus' own life and ministry.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and heard these words, "You are my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Here on the Mount Peter and the Zebedees hear the words, "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And in Jerusalem, at the cross, it is a man, a non-Jew, who says, "Truly, this was the son of God."

The first part of Jesus' ministry, the part after the Baptism, was a time of teaching. He went around Galilee speaking to increasingly large crowds and healing people. He gathered disciples. The prototype of his teaching is the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel writers even present the sermon as if it were the work of a new Moses. It is teaching and commentary – instructions on how to live life, how to order society.

As he preaches and teaches in rural Galilee, far from Jerusalem, the storm clouds of controversy continue to rise. Scribes and representatives of the authorities come out from Jerusalem to see what is going on. At Caesarea Philippi, as he reaches the northern end of the country, he announces to his disciples that it is time to face the music in the city – to face the inevitable confrontations with the authorities. The Gospels say "he set his face to Jerusalem."

The next days and weeks are increasingly challenging, in a way which Elijah challenged the society of his time, and in the way in which the great Hebrew prophets challenged the society. The messages are similar, the critiques are similar. The society is not living up to the standards of God. The religious authorities and the economic and political authorities are blasphemously corrupt, not living up to their ideals.

What is the solution? Some transforming power – but not the power of the state rekindled in a military Messiah – it is the power of God to transform individuals and society through the Holy Spirit – what we call the power of the resurrection. This is the Transformation which Peter and James and John are being introduced to on the mountain, and the reason why they are told to listen to the Beloved Son as they first listened to Moses and Elijah. The third revelation will be acted out, not simply talked about. It begins when you go down from the mountain.

Transformation is the pattern of Jesus' own life and ministry.

3. Transformation is the pattern of our personal salvation.

This is laid out by Paul in his own description of his spiritual journey – of the process of his own conversion and transformation.

We find ourselves aware of what is true and good, and then we find that we are unable to fulfill that. We hear Moses, and we hear our own inner Elijah and Isaiah. We have no power to help ourselves. But there is someone who can restore us to sanity and wholeness – there is a process of transformation which can bring us into the service of

God. It's what Jesus was saying to his disciples, trying to say to them, on the road to Caesarea Philippi. They were so unable to hear it that he had to drag them to the top of the mountain and put on a light show for them even to begin to hear.

If you want to be my disciple, you have to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. He who wants to save his life must lose it. She who loses her life for my sake and for the sake of this incredibly beautiful possibility will save it.

Transformation, beyond both Law and Prophetic criticism, is the pattern of our personal salvation.

4. Transformation is the pattern of Richmond's history.

Richmond had its Moses moments. The first Europeans came here and planted a Cross, indicating they at least had heard of Jesus. They had churches teaching. They had Native American and African traditions which taught what justice really was. They had the Declaration of Independence stating the radical nature of human justice and respect.

And we failed miserably, so miserably. At the same time we were declaring the principles of the Declaration of Independence we were establishing Richmond as the capital of a state dedicated to human inequality, to human bondage and slavery.

We had our prophets. We had Gabriel. We had Nat. We had a devastating war. And in the latter days, we have all had Martin Luther King, Junior.

But we are here in the birth canal, up there on the mountain, wondering if it really is true – if there really is a Son of God and a Holy Spirit of transformation. We don't want to go into Jerusalem to challenge the authorities and oppressors – not only those who look powerful because they have money and power – but those who are powerful because of despair and resentment. The death dies hard. It is hard to challenge.

But if you believe in the Resurrection, it is the only way to go at this time in this history.

Transformation is:

- The spiritual pattern of Israel's history.
- The pattern of Jesus' own life and ministry.
- The pattern of our personal salvation.
- The pattern of Richmond's history.

We're up here on the highest mountain. We have Moses and Elijah. And we have our Lord. Is the Transfiguration simply something we observe, or is it the spirit of the history in which we are immersed? AMEN.