

The Transfiguration of Beauty

Meta

Date: March 2, 2025

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Exodus 34:29–35

Psalm 99

I Corinthians 12:27–13:13

Luke 9:28–36

Opening

In three days' time, we'll gather on Ash Wednesday for the beginning of Lent, and we'll hear the Church call us to a season of repentance and fasting. Yet the whole purpose of fasting is set before us today—to behold the beauty of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Remember this when you struggle, when you fall, when you cave from your fasting discipline: beholding Jesus Christ is the goal of every fast.

You and I crave beauty. It is a hunger and a thirst which only the beauty of Christ can satiate. You may have heard Dostoyevsky's famous saying, 'Beauty will save the World.' Dostoyevsky also wrote that:

*mankind can continue without science, can continue without bread (fasting)— it is only without beauty that we cannot continue, for there will be nothing at all to do in the world! That's where the whole secret lies, that's where the whole of history lies!*¹

Indeed that is the secret of the world, the secret of human history—the craving for beauty. And that craving is satisfied on Mount Tabor when our Lord Jesus was transfigured in his body. St. Luke says that 'As Jesus was praying, his face was altered and his clothing became dazzling white.' There's an entire story wrapped up in that verse.

'Christianity,' says the theologian Olivier Clement, 'is a religion of faces.' Such is the Christian story that began in Eden. When God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, the Holy Spirit give Adam life by speaking words. With words the Lord created the sky, the seas, animals, plants and all things. But over Adam's body he did not create by saying 'Let there be life.' For Adam, the Spirit of God came close. The Spirit descended over Adam face to face, breathed life into his nostrils, breath that gave Adam his soul. And because God created us this way and no other, we have a mystery disclosed in body and soul—the face expresses the spiritual heart. Jesus said much the same when he said 'the eye

¹ *Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Demons*

is the lamp of the body.' We could recall the words of the psalmist to describe Adam and Eve before their fall. 'Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.'² Yes, Adam and Eve knew no shame before their fall. As St. Ephrem the Syrian said, 'It was because the glory in which they were wrapped that they were not ashamed.'

Epiphany is the season of mission and we cherish the calling to mission as Anglicans. Guess what? *Beauty and glory were God's mission from the beginning*: to shine the heaviness (that's what glory means) of God's majesty, his holiness, his mercy, his joy, and his love upon men and women made in his image.

When we turned our faces from him, the craving for beauty did not go away. It became disordered. When we seek beauty apart from God, inevitably it means we try to manufacture our own beauty. We elevate physical beauty and discard spiritual beauty. We make idols from the stuff of this world, 'exchanging the glory of the immortal God,' as St. Paul said, 'worshipping and serving creatures rather than the Creator.'³

When we turn our face away from the Lord, God does not abandon his mission to shine his beauty upon us. He is the Lord, 'who will not give his glory to carved idols,' as Isaiah said, but he still means to redeem us with his beauty.

After the Lord rescues Israel from Egypt, he brings them to the foot of Mount Sinai, then calls one, Moses, to meet with him face to face. As we read from Exodus moments ago, after Moses had been in the presence of the Lord for forty days and nights, 'the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.'

Notice that Moses *didn't know the glory of God radiated from his face. He wasn't thinking of his own glory, he was so immersed in the splendor of God's presence.* And yet when he returned to his people, his countenance was so radiant that Aaron and all Israel were *afraid* of him.

And here is where good Anglicans cannot help, cannot hope to resist, a quotation from our beloved C.S. Lewis. No, it's not the Aslan quote, but the next most oft-quoted line from Lewis:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in nightmare.... There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal... Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object present to your senses.⁴

So luminous was Moses' face after speaking with God that Israel could not look at him unless he wore a veil. Such is the weight of beauty in the presence of God.

Perhaps that is the reason why the remainder of the Old Testament is a chronicle of yearning, the ache for the true beauty of God. In the high priestly prayer of Aaron proclaimed over Israel, it is the face of the Lord that they desire above all things:

² Psalm 34:5

³ Romans 1:23

⁴ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory"

The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

The psalms are soaked with prayers to behold the beauty of the Lord, to ‘seek his face continually.’ King David had one desire:

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.

The Face of Glory in Jesus Christ

All the prayers, the yearning to behold the beauty of God are answered on Mount Tabor in the face of Jesus Christ. *This is the beauty we were born to behold, the only beauty that satisfies our longing.*

This is the mountain where we see not only Jesus’ true nature, that he is the glory of the Father. Here we discover the meaning of our existence, too. Jesus revealed the glory of God in a body just like ours. We were meant to radiate the splendor of God’s holiness, body and soul. The face expresses the spiritual heart, a heart that, like Mount Sinai, is burning with glory of God’s presence, though not consumed. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”⁵

We must note two important aspects of our Lord’s transfiguration. For witnessing our Lord’s beauty is not only a feast for the soul, Christ Jesus has forever redefined our understanding of beauty on Mount Tabor. We, who live in age saturated with images, Instagram, and influencers; of making our image into a personal brand; we must recognize the emptiness of this world, its empty glories, if we wish to see eternal beauty on the face of Jesus Christ.

First, when Jesus’ face is altered, notice that the transfiguration happens while he is praying. As secondly, we notice the conversation that transpires between our Lord, Moses, and Elijah. We get to overhear that conversation. With the light of God shining all around, what are they discussing? They speak about the Lord’s coming departure.

Before Jesus summoned Peter, James, and John up the mountain, the last thing Christ spoke about was taking up his cross. Now he’s speaking about the cross with Moses and Elijah.

What kind of collision is happening? What place does the horror of suffering and crucifixion have when the uncreated light of God is shining all around?

What we witness on this mountain, my brother and sister, is not only the transfiguration of our Lord, but the transfiguration of Beauty itself. Our old notions of beauty are being crucified on Mount Tabor. Jesus’ face is radiant not only because his face is turned eternally toward the Father, his countenance is glorious because he will *leave* Mount Tabor, turning his face toward the the cross at Mount Golgotha.

Because of Mt. Tabor, Beauty will forever be revealed by self-emptying love. Greater beauty has no one than this, than that the Lord of Glory lays down his life for his friends

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4.6

Clothed with Light

And this, my brother and sister, is how *we* become beautiful, not only in soul, but in our bodies. How the light of God shines on our faces. When we take up our cross; when we are willing to lose our life for his sake, so that we may find it, we will be wrapped in the light of God.

Today we have four children of God who are coming to baptism—Andrew, Maverick, Luke, and Bethany. Our church fathers called baptism the sacrament of illumination. It's why the church is clothed in white, because her sons and daughters are being clothed by the glory of God when they come to baptism.

They, too, become beautiful by facing the cross. For the waters in which they are baptized are a figure of the tomb. But the water is also a womb, the womb of glory and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then after rising from the water, the anointing...of the face, of course. In the sign of the cross, of course, the seal of the Holy Spirit. This is the mission of God, to make our faces shine forever with the light and beauty of God. 'Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed,' and all for the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.