

# Beauty Hidden in Weakness

## Meta

Date: February 15, 2025; Last Sunday of Epiphany

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

## Readings

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalms 99

Philippians 3:7-14

Matthew 17:1-9

## Opening

Most of you know my background: I grew up in a Christian family, attended church every time the doors were open. I went to seminary and graduated at age 25. I became an Anglican at age 28. It wasn't until I became an Anglican that this story—the Transfiguration of Jesus—ever took on great significance. Not in church, not in seminary did this story receive much attention. The faintest memory of the transfiguration I have before coming Anglican was the Sunday school leaflets given me as a kid. And in the 80s those leaflets were trying really hard to resemble the legendary Highlights magazine for kids.

Now, we Anglicans read the story of our Lord's transfiguration every final Sunday in Epiphany. And that's not all! The Transfiguration is also a summer feast day, one of the few holy days we have in summer in our liturgical calendar, always occurring on August 6th.

The Transfiguration has been called 'the feast of beauty.' Every occasion we celebrate the Transfiguration, whether at the end of Epiphany or August 6th, is an invitation to contemplate the beauty and glory of the Lord. Jesus said he gave to his disciples peace, peace not as the world gives. He also revealed to his disciples his beauty, but not the beauty this world gives.

Consider this simple paradox contradiction then. Isaiah prophesied of our Lord:

*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him. (Isaiah 53.2)*

And yet Peter, James, and John became eyewitnesses of our Lord's majesty on the holy mountain; they saw his face shine brighter than the sun, his clothes become white as light. How can Jesus have 'no beauty that we should desire him' and also be the one transfigured in glory before his closest disciples? That's a question I want to contemplate today, on this last Sunday of Epiphany, to prepare us for this holy season of Lent.

## At the Base of the Mountain

If you're going to summit a mountain, you best stretch your legs at the trailhead before you begin making your ascent. In the same way, we need to recall what happened *before* Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. If you have your Bible, I'd invite you to turn to Matthew 16. It's on page ### of your pew Bible. In chapter 16, we're in the north at Caesarea Philippi. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. That's in verses 13-20.

Matthew then tells us the conversation gets tense in verses 21-23, "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." And this is abhorrent to Peter. The cross is abhorrent. Ugly, not beautiful. There is no beauty that we should desire one who faces the cross. So Peter rebukes Jesus. Then Jesus rebukes Peter's satanic mindset, and calls him to set his mind on the things of God.

In verses 24-28, Jesus doubles down on the necessity of the cross saying, not only for himself, but for all disciples. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." It's a strange beauty—the beauty of the Lord, a beauty that *requires* the cross. In the next breath, Jesus begins talking about glory—the beauty of God. He says, "The Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father," going on to say "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

There's some foreshadowing there. By 'some standing here,' I believe Jesus means Peter, James and John. These three disciples, six days later, will see the Son of Man coming in the full majesty, power, and glory of his kingdom, present with Moses and Elijah. These are the ones deemed worthy to behold the beauty of Jesus in his uncreated Light.

## A Concealed Beauty

Not everyone, not even all 12 disciples, will be eyewitnesses of the Lord's transfiguration. This is a beauty that conceals itself. There you have a mystery all its own, that God **conceals** his beauty. Only three were invited up the mountain. Why these three? It's a question that certainly interested the church fathers. I find a bit of divine comedy at play here. Jesus chooses three fishermen to witness his transfiguration. All three of them—Peter, James, and John—Jesus chose first by the Sea of Galilee when they had fishing nets in their hands. Now they're chosen to see the face of Jesus shine brighter than the sun. To see the Kingdom of God with their eyes in the fullness of its power. I'll leave it for theologians must greater than myself to work out why Andrew wasn't invited.

But this I believe about beholding the beauty of the Lord: only the humble will be made worthy to witness the glory of God. Only those who are being purified, being made holy will see the Lord. Remember Hebrews 12.14: "Without holiness no one will see the Lord."

It has been, is, and will always be this way—that God chooses the humble to witness his majesty. Remember Moses, the great Lawgiver, who encountered the Lord's glory first in the burning bush, then later on Mount Sinai. Moses was humbled by his inadequacy. He knew he wasn't eloquent, he said he was 'slow of speech,' which may indicate he had an issue with stuttering.

This we also often forget about Moses—his meekness. Moses was "very meek, more than all the people on the face of the earth." This is the one who God chooses to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go so that they may worship me on my holy Mountain." Moses, not eloquent, sometimes frozen in

speech, is precisely the one God chooses to behold his glory at Mount Sinai. There's something about weakness, meekness, and humility. It seems these are **God's prerequisites** to see his majesty and glory.

Not only are these God's prerequisites to witness his beauty, the Lord conceals his majesty in these very things. On this last day of Epiphany, remember Christmas night, when our Lord brought his glory to earth in a manger among farm animals. Not everyone was invited to behold the glory of God. The invitation came first to shepherds. There it is again—the prerequisite of meekness and humility to see God.

The wise men see the majesty of God. Men of great wealth and stature, they leave their country, their stature, and kneel before the infant Jesus, bringing their treasures to him—to extol *his* glory, not their own.

The glory of Jesus was concealed, first in the manger of Bethlehem, and then concealed in Nazareth. Nathanael what everyone was thinking about Jesus' hometown when he said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" There is no beauty in Nazareth, not that backwater town, that we should ever desire it, or imagine that the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Savior who will conquer death and hell, could grow up there.

Yes, for all who trust their own wisdom; who judge things based on appearances; who take pride in their knowledge—God will conceal his glory. His majesty is present, walking throughout Galilee, but hidden under a veil of his great and awesome humility.

Now, as we come to the mount of Transfiguration again, I want you to remember the words of our Lord Jesus, words he spoke at the beginning of his ministry on another mountain almost immediately after he called Peter, James, and John to leave their nets and be his disciples.

Remember when our Lord Jesus said:

*Blessed are the poor in the spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

Those are the words of God—our God who wants to be seen, but who only reveals his power and majesty to the weak, the meek, the humble, those who purify their hearts.

When Christ pulled back the veil, revealed the awesome splendor of his glory, shining from his face, radiating his clothes, Moses and Elijah appeared with him. Once Peter sees Jesus in the fullness of power, he wants to stay. He does not want to leave. Peter speaks up, as usual, in his ready, fire, aim manner, blurting out a plan to build three tabernacles. Then a voice speaks from a bright cloud, the voice of the Father saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." That voice terrified Peter, James, and John. They fell on their faces. It humbled them to the uttermost. They were being purified even in that moment from their flawed vision. Peter treated Jesus as an equal with Moses and Elijah. Oh, but Moses and Elijah are not equal to our Lord. To see Jesus, to see the Son of God *as he is*, they had to have scales lifted from their eyes once more. They had to see Scripture anew. Moses, representing all the Law and Elijah, representing the Prophets, all these writings find their meaning only in Jesus. Matthew pens one of my favorite lines in all the Gospels when he writes, "And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only."

And that, in essence, is what purity of heart means—to desire Jesus only. That is what we mean by experiencing beauty—to see Jesus only. I'm so pleased that Christians have recovered love for beauty

in the past few decades, but God save us from an abstract love of beauty. The Transfiguration teaches us that there is no beauty apart from our Lord Jesus, and there is no beauty that refuses the cross. The splendor of his majesty, bursting forth from the empty tomb of Easter morning, was hidden—concealed—within the ugliness of his cross on Good Friday.

## Conceal This Sight

It's so interesting that after so great a revelation, Jesus says to Peter, James, and John, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." There he goes again—concealing his majesty, veiling his beauty. And it's all because the splendor of his love can only be found in facing the cross.

There's a gag order on these three disciples, and for good reason. Don't speak of this because the pride and powerful will try to use it for their purposes. If they heard about his splendor, they would make it about politics, kings, and empire. They will try to force him to be king. My goodness, they tried doing that anyway, even when the transfiguration was a well-kept secret.

They will try to separate the majesty of God from the cross of Jesus Christ. The infant boy who concealed his glory in Bethlehem and Nazareth will keep his glory veiled when he is nailed on the cross. This is the splendor of God. He conceals his power among the pride and powerful, but reveals his glory and his majesty to those who come to the cross—to those who seek him in weakness, the poor in spirit, the meek in soul, purified in their hearts. Do you want to see Jesus only—to encounter him in the splendor of his majesty? Come to him in humility, welcome his purifying work, come to him with your weakness.

## Paul at Corinth

To close, I'd like to bring our readings from the Daily Office into these thoughts on the glory of Christ. Yesterday in the Daily Office we read 2 Corinthians 12, a famous passage when Paul speaks openly to the Corinthians about a thorn in his flesh. It was a source of severe pain, presumably Paul's greatest weakness. It was a thorn Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove. Paul prayed and he got an answer, an answered prayer that he didn't want. Instead of taking this thorn away, the Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul not only accepted this answer from the Lord, he **rejoiced** in it, saying

*Therefore I will **boast** all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

Now here we have a curious choice of words in Paul's original language; in that phrase 'that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' The word for 'rest' is a word which means 'tabernacle.' Read: 'I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may tabernacle in me.' Very interesting to consider in light of Peter's desire to build three tabernacles on the mount of Transfiguration. Put them together and you and I find that Christ tabernacles in *our weakness* and transfigures it with his glory. His glory is concealed in our weakness, if we will look for him there. Our suffering becomes his tabernacle, the place where his radiant beauty takes up residence. The cross was the great secret of Christ's beauty and so *it will be for us, too.*

St. Gregory of Nazianzen described the transfiguration as 'the mystery of the future.' It was not only a glimpse of the future resurrection. This is the glimpse of our future, too. Jesus Christ radiated the glory of God, not in some other object or form, but in his human body. And that is the mystery of the future he reveals for all the poor in spirit, meek in soul, purified in heart. You and I, embracing our weakness and our cross, are invited not only to *behold* the beauty of God, but to radiate the splendor

of God in our resurrected bodies, as well. But not for our glory. Not to us, not to us, Lord, but to your Name be glory alone, whose Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.