

*Transfiguration and disfiguration*⁸

... a cloud came and overshadowed them: and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

LUKE 9:34

There is an Anglican Church in New York City called the Church of the Transfiguration, but it is much better known locally as 'the little church around the corner', a title which is even printed on the notice board. A North American student who did a placement with me in the East End of London over ten years ago told me that, after a month, she had come to mistrust two English expressions which she had encountered when asking for directions to places. The first was 'You can't miss it'. This, she said, translated meant 'It is very difficult

to find'. The second was 'It's just around the corner'. This, she said, meant that it could be anywhere from five yards to ten miles away.

But the Church of the Transfiguration 'around the corner' witnesses to the truth that transfiguration, the dazzling light of the glory of God, can occur anywhere. We sense that glory in the midst of the common and the ordinary, as Francis Thompson said 'between heaven and Charing Cross'. It is in the midst of the common life, not apart from it, that we experience the glory which dominates this feast. The late Bishop Ian Ramsey was always saying that there are moments 'when the penny drops'. He would then add: 'This is what I call a cosmic disclosure situation'. It usually happens in ordinary places, often in unexpected places and at unexpected times. Transfiguration happens 'around the corner'.

Very little attention has been paid in the Western Church to the Transfiguration. While St Leo the Great in the fifth century, and St John of Damascus in the seventh century preached on it, it was not until 1457 that Pope Callistus III introduced the feast into the universal calendar of the Roman rite. Among Anglicans, it did not survive the Reformation, and its celebration did not figure in Anglican liturgies from 1549 to 1928. I would be interested to know if there are any Anglican churches in England dedicated to the Transfiguration, though there are many in the US. There is one Roman Catholic church in Kensal Rise in West London, but I am not aware of others.

Nor does the centrality of glory, so important biblically, figure much in the collects for this feast. The collect prescribed in *Common Worship* calls on us to 'bear our cross' but says nothing about our transfiguration. The Roman collect is certainly better with its reference to 'the splendour of your beloved sons and daughters'. *The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church* in the US prays that we may be 'delivered from the disquietude of this world', though, apart from death, I am not quite clear how this is to take place! By far the best is that in the *Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*: here we pray that God would deliver us from darkness and change us into his likeness from glory to glory.

It is also depressing that there has been little theological writing about the Transfiguration apart from Bishop Michael Ramsey's book *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*. It is significant that Ramsey was greatly influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy. In the Orthodox churches, there are almost always three icons present in the

smallest church – the Baptism of Christ, the Transfiguration, and the Resurrection. In this tradition, the stress is on both the glory of God and the glory of humanity as central, while sin is viewed as, literally, accidental to human nature (which is why, rightly or wrongly, the Orthodox do not like Augustine very much!).

To turn from Mount Tabor to the horror of Hiroshima might seem obscene, while to suggest that there were similarities might seem blasphemous. Yet there are twisted, demonic similarities between the two. In each event there was brilliant and dazzling light, and Robert Jungk entitled his book on the Hiroshima bombing *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*. There was a cloud, and I cannot imagine that those who experienced the bombing of Hiroshima could not have identified with my text – 'a cloud came and overshadowed them: and they were terrified as they entered the cloud'. But the mushroom cloud of Hiroshima was a kind of demonic antitype to the cloud of transfiguration: it could be described as a cloud of cosmic disfiguration – of God's 'beloved sons and daughters' as of the earth itself.

And there was revelation. I am struck by the frequency with which commentators on Hiroshima (including Noam Chomsky) use terms such as 'apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic'. Apocalypse means unveiling, revealing. At Mount Tabor it was the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ which was revealed and, by implication, the potential glory of human beings made in God's image. At Hiroshima it was the human potential for destruction, for cruelty, for incalculable violence, which was revealed. Each event told us a story about our potential for good and for evil.

This feast, so neglected in the west, is rooted in the gospels and in the testimony of early Christian writers. Both Matthew and Mark use the word 'transfigured', while Luke does not, preferring the word 'changed'. What is often missed is that, first, transfiguration precedes resurrection: it occurs in the midst of perplexity, imperfection, and disastrous misunderstanding. Within a few verses of Luke's account of the transfiguration, the disciples are urging Jesus to call down fire from heaven to destroy his enemies. At this late point, they still haven't 'got it'. Secondly, transfiguration does not apply to Jesus in isolation but to us. The two crucial texts here are Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. Few, if any, English versions translate the word used as 'transfigured', though it is the same word used in the account of the event on Mount Tabor. In Romans, Paul urges us to 'be not con-

formed, but be transformed', or, literally, 'transfigured'. In 2 Corinthians we are said to be in process of being transformed (transfigured) from glory to glory. In each case, the Greek word is the same: 'metamorphosed', transfigured. It is this emphasis, on our own transfiguration, on our sharing in the divine glory, which is missing in so much of our western Christian thinking.

Transfiguration can and does occur 'just around the corner', occurs in the midst of perplexity, imperfection and disastrous misunderstanding. The hope of glory does not lie in a return to a lost paradisaal innocence, but in a movement forward towards the Kingdom of God, which is only manifested through the encounter with evil, injustice and frailty.