

## Transfigured

*(Luke 9:27-29) "Now about eight days later, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white."*

Over recent weeks I have had divided loyalties on Sunday evenings between 'War & Peace' (BBC1) and 'Deutschland'83' (Channel 4). Both are gripping dramas, which start each episode with the word 'Previously', when moments from the last show are glimpsed as a reminder of what has gone before and to whet your appetite for what is to come.

Well, 'Previously' in Luke chapter 9 Jesus sent out his disciples into the towns and villages of Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom, he perplexed King Herod, fed the 5,000, challenged Peter's faith, and defined the demands of discipleship. Now we find Jesus standing on the mountaintop.

Things are beginning to get exciting with the build up to the Presidential election in the United States: the show; the oratory; the promises. It interesting how political campaigns attempt to connect, not only with hopes for the future, but also with nostalgia for the past. So often the spirit of past heroes is evoked to validate the policies of the present, whether that be Ronald Reagan, John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King. In terms of our politics, the Conservative Party frequently summons the spirit of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, while Labour recalls the likes of Keir Hardie and Nye Bevan.

Similarly, this experience of Jesus' Transfiguration involves the presence of two historical figures, Moses and Elijah. But this is not about celebrity endorsement, like George Clooney advertising coffee or David Beckham flogging perfume for men. This is about God's advocates being a constant witness to divine happenings. So, here is Moses the Liberator, who received God's Laws on the mountaintop, and Elijah the Prophet, who conveyed God's justice having heard the 'still small voice'. Thus, this experience on the summit resonates with previous episodes of God's story about our world.

As we read in Exodus 34, for Moses the mountaintop experience was actually the summit of his life: from the Exodus out of Egypt to glimpsing the horizon of the Promised Land. We are reminded of this in Luke 9 when Jesus' face changes appearance at the summit, just as Moses' face shone having talked with God. So, Moses, along with Elijah and other prophets, bears witness across the ages to Transfiguration.

Taiwanese theologian, C. S. Song has challenged me for many years through his writings. His book 'Third Eye Theology' argues that the Asian perspective gives a third dimension to Christian thought. Song begins with his context as he considers Transfiguration: *"The life of Jesus from the beginning to the end is now perceived as the life of transfiguration. What they began to see . . . must have been the Jesus who had been transfigured from a lowly carpenter into the herald of the good news of God's salvation; from an ordinary human being into the Way, the Truth, and the Life; from a lonely religious teacher into a bold opponent of the powerful religious hierarchy of his day; and from an insignificant man of an oppressed race into a towering figure standing without fear before the oppressor's tribunal."*

Transfiguration is about a change of perspective, of purpose, of personhood. Trans/figure/ation: a shift in understanding of how we see Jesus, and in light of him, how we then see ourselves and the world around us. This is a summit moment, a time to leave the past behind and look ahead. Because this episode of the transfiguring experience of God shown to us in Jesus does not end in the dizzy heights, but comes back to earth with a thud. For this not a Presidential campaign with the mountaintop as a podium; this is the summit of Jesus' campaign for the Kingdom of God that reveals that transfiguration is meant for all creation, and that means even us.

(Luke 9:37) *“On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him.”* ‘Thud!’ Straightaway Jesus is thrown back into the thick of human life and need; for here is a child suffering from epilepsy, a condition that was understood in terms of evil spirits, making the boy unclean in the eyes of society. What happened next was living proof of Jesus’ campaign which upturns human values by introducing the ways of heaven on earth. So transfiguration takes place on the ground, just as it had on the summit: the condition is confronted, the child is restored, *“And all were astonished at the greatness of God.”* (Luke 9:43a)

So, in this episode of the life of Jesus we have seen a gear-change in his campaign for the Kingdom of God. This is a summit moment, with his Galilean ministry behind him, Jesus looks to Jerusalem. But now he has been transfigured into the ultimate witness to the transfiguring story of God about our world, a story that resonates across the ages and speaks to us today. Now Jesus is ready to journey to Jerusalem where his story will end and begin again. Are we ready to travel with him?

Neil Johnson (February 2016)