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# INTRODUCTION

Why read a book on the transfiguration? And why a Lent book on the transfiguration? Perhaps I can answer that by telling you why I wrote this one.

The transfiguration has always intrigued me. It's not really like anything else in the Gospels. There are plenty of miracle stories in which Jesus heals those who are sick or feeds those who are hungry. But the transfiguration doesn't quite fit that category—Jesus isn't helping anyone in need. The nearest parallels in the Gospels are probably the resurrection appearances of Jesus. But, while the risen Christ clearly has a transformed body, he looks like any other human being. He's not radiating light in the way he does at the transfiguration. The transfiguration stands unique.

And I'm attracted to passages I find weird! It could be that the Bible doesn't make sense, or it could be that there's a bigger significance waiting to be discovered. My policy is to assume the second option and dive deep into the weirdness! That's what I've done with the

transfiguration, and I've not been disappointed. The transfiguration turns out to be a window onto so many important gospel truths. Here they shine—quite literally, for at the transfiguration, the face of Jesus “shone like the sun” (Matthew 17:2). On the mountain of transfiguration, the person and work of Jesus are on display in glorious technicolour.

This leads to a second reason why I wanted to look at the transfiguration. Paul says, “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). We become more like Jesus—we’re transformed into his image—by looking at his beauty. Looking at Jesus leads to being captivated by Jesus, and this in turn leads to becoming more like Jesus. We’re changed by contemplating the glory of Jesus.

This is what drew me to the transfiguration. I want to be changed, and being changed means contemplating the glory of Jesus. So where to begin? The transfiguration looks like a great option. After all, this was the moment on earth when the glory of Jesus literally became visible as light radiated from his person. If you want to look at the glory of Christ, this is a great place to start.

But why a book on the transfiguration for Lent? After all, the transfiguration was done and dusted long before the beginning of the first Holy Week. The answer is that the transfiguration keeps pointing us to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It provides its own distinctive camera angle from which to view the cross

and resurrection. Perhaps that's not a surprise with the resurrection; we can readily imagine how the glory of transfiguration points to the victory of the risen Christ. But it turns out that the transfiguration also spotlights the message of Calvary. So the transfiguration is a great companion as we approach Easter.

This book is divided into weeks which correspond to the weeks of Lent. Each week focuses on one account of the transfiguration. Each day contains a devotion followed by a suggested meditation, usually in the form of a Bible verse, a quote or a hymn. The exception is Sunday (and the first Thursday of Lent). Each Sunday you're invited slowly and prayerfully to read the passage of Scripture that will form the basis of the rest of that week's reflections.

Don't worry if you get behind. You could use Sundays as a way of catching up. But in fact, it doesn't matter if you don't track with Lent and Easter. The transfiguration speaks to us every day of the year! It is a year-round invitation to be dazzled by our radiant Redeemer.

# RADIANT

THE BEGINNING OF LENT

## ASH WEDNESDAY

*His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.*

**MARK 9:3**

Imagine a large plastic Santa in your town square. It's been placed in some kind of tableau ready for the run-up to Christmas. But, at the moment, it's looking a bit lost in the darkness of the evening. If I hadn't drawn your attention to it, you would probably have missed it in the gloom. But then someone pulls a switch, and an electric bulb turns on. From somewhere deep within itself, suddenly light radiates from our plastic Santa, illuminating all around it.

By any estimation, the transfiguration of Jesus was an extraordinary event. For a brief moment, it was as if a switch was hit and suddenly light radiated from somewhere deep within Jesus, illuminating all around him. "His clothes became dazzling white," says Mark 9:3. Jesus was dazzling.

What was going on? Well, a lot more than we might at first imagine—the transfiguration is a light that illuminates the meaning of the cross and resurrection. As we look deeper, we'll discover that it's not just Jesus who is



transfigured. His promise is that we, too, can be transfigured by the light he brings to our lives.

Ash Wednesday is traditionally a day on which to contemplate our sin. We look within and see not light but darkness.

We need light. We need illumination. We need Jesus.

The apostle John begins his Gospel, “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:9). The light of Jesus is a metaphor: to “see the light” is to grasp an idea for the first time; we need light to ensure we follow the right path; or we say, “There’s light at the end of the tunnel”, to express a sense of hope. Light is a picture of understanding and hope. And light has come into the world, says John. Except John is talking about a person—the person of Jesus. Jesus himself is understanding and hope.

But on the mountain of transfiguration, that light became more than a metaphor. The light of Jesus quite literally shone in the darkness of our world.

Now come back to our plastic Santa. In one of the towns in which I used to live, the plastic Santa was well past his sell-by date! No doubt he had looked fantastic back in the day, but now he was shabby and worn. That wasn’t a problem during the daytime, as long as you didn’t look too closely. But at night, the light from within illuminated all the dirt and cracks. He looked worse with the light on.

With Jesus it was quite the opposite: the light revealed his glory and beauty.

It’s our flaws that are illuminated and shown up by

the light of Jesus (John 3:19-21). I look ok, as long as you don't look too closely—as long as you don't hold me up to the light in the way you might hold laundry up to see if it's clean. But the light of Christ exposes my sin and failure. On Ash Wednesday, we come to him in confession. The light of the transfigured Jesus gives us understanding, and today that means an understanding of the depths of our sin. But, as we shall see, it also shines a light on the hope we have in Jesus. Even as we confess our sin, we can come before God with confidence because we come in hope, to find hope. "He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Here's an ancient prayer known as the Trisagion, which you can use to confess your sins:

*Holy God,  
holy and strong,  
holy and immortal,  
have mercy on us.*

**MEDITATION**

*This is the message we have heard  
from him and declare to you:  
God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.  
If we claim to have fellowship with him  
and yet walk in the darkness,  
we lie and do not live out the truth.  
But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light,  
we have fellowship with one another,  
and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.  
If we claim to be without sin,  
we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.  
If we confess our sins,  
he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins  
and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

*(1 John 1:5-9)*

## FRIDAY

*“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”*

**MARK 9:7**

One of the legends of mid-20th-century British comedy was Arthur Askey. One of his catchphrases was “Before your very eyes”. It became the title of his first TV show and later his autobiography. I’m too young to have seen Askey “before my very eyes”! But his catchphrase entered my vocabulary through my grandmother.

At the transfiguration, the disciples see the glory of God *before their very eyes*. Mark specifically says Jesus “was transfigured *before them*” (Mark 9:2). The phrase “before them” suggests that this event was for the benefit of the disciples. Elijah and Moses are also said to have “appeared *before them*” (v 4).

There’s another indication that the transfiguration is for the disciples. The words of the Father at the transfiguration are similar to his words at the baptism of Jesus, but with two significant changes:

*“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (1:11)*

*“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (9:7)*

We will return later to one of those changes—the words “With you I am well pleased” instead of “Listen to him!” For now, let’s focus on the other change; the words at the baptism are addressed to Jesus for his benefit (“You are...”), while the words at the transfiguration are addressed to the disciples for their benefit (“This is...”).

The transfiguration did not provide new information for Jesus. Instead, it revealed his divine glory to the three disciples. The biblical scholar Joel Green says the point is “not that Jesus experienced an internal adjustment of some sort that led to his transformed appearance, but that his inner being was made transparent to those who accompanied him.”<sup>12</sup> Or, as Michael Ramsey writes, “On the mount of Transfiguration a veil is withdrawn, and the glory which the disciples are allowed to see is not only the glory of a future event, but the glory of Him who is the Son of God.”<sup>13</sup>

Jesus is on his way to the cross. The disciples will see him suffer horribly. It will seem as if his life has ended in failure. But the memory of the transfiguration will fortify their faith. Jesus “was transfigured *before them*” to reveal who he is when appearances will suggest that he is nobody. In that moment, they will fail to understand why Jesus is suffering. But also in that moment, they can look back to the transfiguration and hold on to that vision of his glory.

The same is true for us when we suffer. In the moment, we may not understand why we’re suffering.

But in those times, we can look back to the transfiguration, and look up to Christ's ascended glory, and look forward to his glorious return. If this is you today, hold on to this vision of the glory of Christ and let his glory fortify your faith.

**MEDITATION**

*Before thy Crucifixion, O Christ,  
the Mount became like unto the heavens,  
and a cloud was outspread like a canopy,  
while thou wast transfigured,  
and while the Father bore witness unto thee,  
there was Peter, together with James and John,  
inasmuch as they desired to be with thee  
at the time of thy betrayal also;  
that, having beheld thy marvels,  
they might not be affrighted at thy sufferings.  
Make us also worthy to adore the same in peace,  
for the sake of thy great mercy.*

*(Orthodox Vespers for the Feast  
of the Transfiguration)<sup>14</sup>*