



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**23 February 2020: Choral Eucharist**

**The Sunday next before Lent**

**Exodus 24:12–end, 2 Peter 1:16–end, Matthew 17:1–9**

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A small monastic cell. A young novice's hand prayerfully sets the gessoed board down on his workspace. Tempera mixed, gold leaf at the ready, he is nervous but determined – ready to put in action all the truths of his master. Carefully he applies the bole to denote the earthy clay of Mount Tabor and tries to hold in his mind not just the great icon he is copying but the very light of the revelation of the transfiguration. So hard is the task of capturing this mystery, the great Gospel story that we have just heard that many modern commentators now doubt that novices could ever have been set to such a labour for their first work. Why not begin with something easier, simpler? Certainly no modern workshop would start here.

But there's a deep spiritual reason why the old schools of iconography chose the transfiguration first up – not to weed out the faint-hearted or the untalented, but to stress that in painting an icon it was spiritual sight that mattered more than artistic merit. If one cannot paint the truth of the transfiguration by the Taboric light and hold together the paradox of heaven and earth, then one should not paint at all.

The story of the transfiguration goes to the heart of revelation. What had been glimpsed in the nativity and the adoration of the magi, in Christ's baptism at the Jordan and the start of his ministry with its signs, miracles and teaching comes into full focus. Peter, James and John ascend with Jesus up the mountain and suddenly he is transfigured, changed, or, in the Greek, metamorphosed (Mt. 17:2). Metamorphosis was a common motif in Greek and Roman myth – like Ovid's tales of humans transformed by capricious gods, Actaeon become a stag, Daphne a laurel tree, Ceyx and Alcyone flitting across the water as kingfishers. Jewish apocalyptic too could speak of angels appearing as human, of beings transformed like the sun, amidst kaleidoscopic landscapes of jewels and gemstones. Jesus, however, does not become something new, is not transported somewhere else. He is simply revealed as what he always was, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14).

On the mountaintop, the disciples see Christ as he truly is and hear the same voice that had echoed at his baptism – “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 17:5; 3:17). Not so much a special repeat for those not present on the Jordan’s banks, but rather what the Father always says to the Son and that only occasionally are humans ready to hear.

Commentators have spilled much ink on the links between this revelation and the resurrection accounts, the parallels too with Mount Sinai and how central and seminal this moment was for the three disciples and all they would share it with. But today I want to focus on two details. The first is one of timing.

One of the perils of the lectionary is lack of context and you’d be forgiven for not knowing precisely where in Matthew’s Gospel the transfiguration comes. But for the evangelist it’s critical – “after six days” (Mt. 17:1). This is a revelation that was only possible in the context of Peter’s great confession. After the feeding of the five thousand and of the four, Jesus challenged the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”; and then all the more cuttingly, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:13, 15) In a moment of revelation, Peter declared, “You are the messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). And yet no sooner had he said this and Jesus begun to explain what this meant in terms of his suffering and death, than Peter wanted to deny it – to declare that this could never happen to the Christ (Mt. 16:21-23).

“And after six days”. The mountaintop revelation of the transfiguration is rooted in the context of Jesus knowing his suffering and Luke makes it more explicit, having him discuss his ‘exodus’, his going down to Calvary and death, with Moses and Elijah (Lk. 9:31). It is only in accepting the suffering of Christ that one can truly see his glory – they are two sides of the same thing.

That tiny detail, that little phrase – “and after six days” – it reminds us that all too often we are caught like Peter in only wanting to know the majesty and power of God. However, these are found not in denying shame and suffering but journeying through them. That is why this story is read on the cusp of Lent, as we set our hearts towards Jerusalem once more and ready ourselves to work anew the way of the cross. Whether we are painting an icon in a Russian monastery or weaving the threads of a life in Oxford, we need to do so by the divine light and we need to know that the divine light does not obliterate the shadows, does not negate the suffering but transforms it.

And the heart of how it does that is another little detail – “Jesus came and touched them” (Mt. 17:7). The God who is revealed on Mount Tabor, shining with all the uncreated light of the divine, is not a distant God, not capricious or remote. He is the Word made flesh, with human hands and feet, human tears and laughter. When the disciples fall on their faces, awe-struck and overcome, he doesn’t just say, “Rise and have no fear” (Mt. 17:6-7) like so many angelic theophanies before him, instead he comes and touches them.

Touch matters. It brings a closeness, an intimacy that transcends words. So often when we don’t know what to say, when we can’t make things better, when we’re alongside someone in persecution, pain or suffering, a touch says and does what words cannot. A hug. A squeeze of a shoulder. A clasp of a hand. Human-to-human, heart-to-heart solidarity.

I remember the first time I was called out to administer last rites – dashing to the bedside of a faithful parishioner in hospital but alas his mom and I arrived too late. He had already slipped away and what met us in the hospital room was not the man we’d known and prayed with but just a body. The words I’d been trained to say, the rites I’d been called to perform were no use. Silence gripped the room and time seemed to stop, as our faces crumpled in shock and sadness and grief. I don’t know who reached out first, can’t recall whose hand grasped whose. But suddenly my hand was in hers and both of ours holding his, the three of us together, the living and the dead, making one last physical connection. Touch mattered and held us in those moments, until words trickled forth – the Lord’s prayer, a simple commendation, “Go forth, Christian soul...” and the beginning of sharing memories.

The transfiguration captures in miniature the truth of who Christ is – the radiance of the glory of the only Son of the Father, the gladdening light from before the dawn of creation, who did not stay far off, only to be encountered on mountaintops or in the deep mysteries of prayer, but who came and touched the world.

To paint an icon involves holding on to both these truths – the ineffable divine light that transcends time and the physical reality of rough wooden boards and smears of paint in the here and now. Starting with the transfiguration is no bad thing – however much it might feel like being thrown in at the deep end. So too to live a Christian life. We must hold together the Word and the flesh. For only together will they make sense of Calvary and draw us on the way of the cross that we may be transfigured too (Rom. 12:2).