

2nd Sunday of Lent (Year C) 2016  
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

When were you last transfigured? When last did your appearance change so that people remarked how different you looked?

There is every chance that it will have been a time of supreme happiness, and every possibility that it will have had something to do with being in love. A father at the birth of a longed for baby may well be transfigured as he holds the infant for the first time, overcome with pride and overwhelmed with love for his wife and this the fruit of their loving union. Someone who is caught up in the whirl of romance, loving and being loved will be transfigured for the world is an entirely different place to those who are love as many a song in many a musical relates. Transfiguration is as common as being truly, madly, deeply in love.

But those of you of a more pessimistic and dour disposition may well have thought other thoughts when I asked my opening questions. When were you last transfigured? When last did your appearance change so that people remarked how different you look? The response might just as easily involve a time of misery leading to depression, grief turning to desolation, or anger raging with blackened looks and terrifying eye. One might be transfigured when the doctor arrives with the biopsy results and won't look you in the face but mumbles how sorry he is and says words like, 'malignant', 'inoperable', 'terminal'. One might be transfigured by the death of one's child as your personal world collapses and your face becomes ghostly and your eyes vacant. Transfiguration can mean transformed with anger. Transfiguration is as common as desperately bad or sad or enraging news.

And sometimes the cause of the transfiguration to bliss can be exactly the same as brings transfiguration to desolation.

Jesus' transfiguration is a perplexing episode in his ministry; the more so since Mark, Matthew and Luke seem to have a different understanding of its significance. (John does not record any such incident, for him Jesus is always transfigured, ever glorious for those who have the eyes of faith to see it).

Today we are concerned with the third Gospel's telling of the event, and we must stay with his interpretation.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is still in Galilee. Later in this chapter he will set his face for Jerusalem and start the journey whose destiny is the only city suitable for the prophet to die. He goes up the mountain to pray. Prayer is very important

in Luke's Gospel. Jesus prays at significant moments in his ministry. After his baptism he is at prayer when the heavens open, the Spirit descends on him and the Father's voice announces him to be 'the Beloved Son'. He prays before he chooses the Twelve. He prays on this mountain. He prays on the Mount of Olives (again while the chosen three sleep) on the night before his death. So what happens on the mountain of Transfiguration is important for Jesus ministry, his mission.

On the mountain as Jesus prays his face changes, his clothes dazzle in their brightness and Moses and Elijah are seen with him. Moses was said to be the author of the Torah, the Law, the Bible's first five books; Elijah was the most significant figure in the history books of the Bible that were known as the Early Prophets. Together they represent all that has gone before in Sacred History. Elijah had gone up to heaven in a fiery chariot; Moses, whose death is recorded in the last book he wrote, was believed in popular thinking to have been taken up to heaven. These two holy men, perhaps heavenly men, are speaking (literally) about 'his Exodus' that he will accomplish in Jerusalem. 'Exodus' is a word heavy with significance. It is not merely a departure. It is a departure from slavery and a progress towards a Promised Land. But it is a departure which comes at a price. While the Israelites will rejoice as they depart from their enslavement, carrying with them the riches, taken from their erstwhile masters, the Egyptians are desolate in lamentation at the loss of their first born sons. The same event transfigures both nations in very different ways. In Jerusalem Jesus will accomplish a new salvation for his people, but his liberation of his people from their sins will come at a terrible price for him

Luke seems to be saying that the Transfiguration is the time that Jesus, in prayer, came to an understanding of his destiny. He was to go to Jerusalem, face his opponents who were much more powerful than himself, and die. This realization made his face shine as dazzlingly as his garments, as he embraced his mission, his purpose, his destiny to die. And his radiance glowed even more brightly as he heard his Father announce again his love for his Son. Nothing transfigures face, body and soul more than the affirmation of love from the one you love.

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, cousin to the Cardinal, was a great Scripture scholar. I once heard him expound a theory that the original Transfiguration tradition was simple and brief. "Jesus face changed". The evangelist, Mark first, followed by Matthew and Luke, interpreted this as transformed with radiance. Jerome's thesis was that it was actually transformed in horror. That this was the moment when he realised what his Father was asking of him. It is, as it were, a first playing out of the experience of the prayer on the Mount of Olives that fateful night, minutes before he was arrested. He saws the future and was filled with

dread. He was transfigured with horror. And he set his face resolutely for Jerusalem – the place, the only place suitable for a prophet to die.

Think of that next time you are transfigured, when your appearance changes so that people remark how different you look.