

**Transfiguration - Sunday 19 February 2012 (St. Luke, Toowoomba)**  
**- sermon by the Revd. Dr. Jonathan Inkpin**

It is said that the poet Alfred Tennyson was walking one day in a beautiful garden where many flowers were blooming. Someone stopped him and asked: 'Mr. Tennyson, you speak so often of Jesus. Will you tell me what Christ really means to you?' Tennyson thought for a moment, and then, pointing down to a beautiful flower, he said: 'what the sun is to that flower, Jesus Christ is to my soul.' 'What the sun is to that flower, Jesus Christ is to my soul': That, my friends, is at the heart of the feast of Transfiguration. Let's put it another way. Look around at one of the stained glass windows in this church building. 'What the sun is to that window', we might say, 'Jesus Christ is to our souls.' Without the light of the sun, the beauty of a flower cannot thrive. Without the light of the sun, a window is but a dull shape and form. But, *with* the light of the sun, they are wonderful and they go on to light up the world and all who see them. You can understand why some ancient peoples actually worshipped the sun, can't you? It does bring such life, and transformation, to all aspects of our world. But when it comes to God in Jesus Christ, we are talking about an incomparably *greater* light. For we are talking about what the ancient and Orthodox theologians call the '*uncreated light*': the light which is not part of creation, like the sun and the moon, but which is part of the uncreated energy of God which flows from God's very being. This is what is revealed in the Gospel story we hear today: the Gospel story we usually call the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration of Jesus: this is a Christian feast, which, for many centuries, has sadly been under appreciated in the western Church. For in many ways it is the zenith of Jesus' earthly ministry: a powerful revelation both of who Christ is and of what God will do through him; an anticipation not only of the glory of the Resurrection but also of the end and purpose of all things. Yet today perhaps we are slowly recovering the significance of the Transfiguration. We are beginning to see that this is a vital story for understanding who *we* are, as well as who Christ, is. For the feast of the Transfiguration shows the destiny of all who are in union with Christ. It invites us to participate in the divine nature of God. As the great early Church theologian Athanasius expressed it: 'God became (hu)man so that humans might become (like) God'. Now, isn't *that* something! No wonder we have struggled to celebrate the Transfiguration. For we have often been brought up to believe that God and human beings are so radically different that we are entirely separate. But how can we participate in something which is entirely separate? Well, we can't, can we? But we are *not* separate from God. What the sun is to the flower, or to a stained glass window, so God in Jesus Christ is to our souls. We participate in God. We are illumined, lit up. We are transfigured. That is the truth and promise at the heart of Christian life. Through the light of Christ all things are transformed, so that all of creation will be transformed fully by the end of times.

Let me come back to this vital subject of our participation in God in a moment. Firstly, let me say something about the proclamation of who Jesus is in today's Gospel story. What kind of a story is it? Well, it is clearly not a straightforward, literal, story of fact. Some scholars indeed regard it as a mythological accretion or as a post-resurrection event which was adapted and incorporated into the life of Jesus by the first three Gospel writers. The western Church has also been similarly unsure about where to place it in the church's calendar. Over the centuries, for example, it has also been placed during Lent as well as just before Lent and also in August, where the Orthodox Church places it. Perhaps this simply reflects the sheer depth and breadth of the story. For it brings together so many different elements of Christian Faith all in one. Indeed, when I was preparing this sermon, I realised that we could spend several weeks, months, and even years on the Transfiguration without hardly scratching its surface.

For a helpful way to view the Transfiguration is as a religious icon: that is, as a profound work of art which symbolises intense religious meaning. It is like a stained glass window, through which the light of God is refracted. Like a great religious icon, it is also not so much created for us to look at, as for us to see God looking at us, drawing us more deeply into the love and mystery of God's very life. No wonder then that the Transfiguration is one of the great subjects of Orthodox Christian iconography and no wonder so many Orthodox church buildings are named after the Transfiguration. For it is an amazing story, full of religious insight and spiritual truth, and the more we become part of it, the more we are transformed by it. It is set in time, but it takes us beyond time: for it is a window into eternity.

The Transfiguration story is full of symbols, rich in meaning. Let me draw attention to but a little. For in a way the whole Bible and Christian Faith is summed up in it. Jesus climbs the mountain, the way to God. He meets Elijah and Moses, who represent the Law and the Prophets, which point to Christ as their fulfilment. He is enveloped by a cloud, representing the Holy Spirit, and, as at his baptism, the Father speaks, saying: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!' The mystery of the Holy Trinity is thereby displayed, in the heart of which we see revealed the mystery of the person of Christ, both divine light and glorified humanity. Through this dual nature, God both joins our humanity and raises it up, uniting us in Christ and fulfilling the purpose of our creation in Genesis. Whilst proclaiming this inner meaning of Christmas, the Incarnation, the Transfiguration thus also prepares us for Holy Week and Easter: for the Resurrection and the fulfilment of all things. No wonder the ancient Church and the Orthodox Church give such weight to this story. It is all the Christian creeds wrapped into one, glorious, icon.

And the greatest glory for us is the promise, and reality, of participation in God. That is the purpose of the presence of Peter, James and John, who represent, as archetypal disciples, all who share in Christ. For in them, Jesus is showing us the way up the mountain, the path to God. Just as he, as a human being, is transfigured, so we too, in participating in him, can be transformed into divinity. As Paul puts it, in today's second reading: 'it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' For the Transfiguration is not only an event. It is also a process: the process of what the Orthodox call deification, or, in Greek, *theosis*. It is the process by which humans become 'participants in the divine nature', as the second letter to Peter (2 Peter 1.4) puts it in our Bible. We in the West tend to be somewhat nervous of this, suspicious of new age mysticism and some parts of eastern religions. Yet it is right at the heart of the Christian experience: amply attested to in John's Gospel and St. Paul; widespread in the life, prayer and teaching of the early Church; everywhere in the continuous tradition of the Orthodox Church; and sparkling away in the best teaching and spirituality of our Anglican tradition. And it is no wonder perhaps, if we have lost this understanding, that new age and other religious philosophies have gained ground among us. For, without the experience of growing in God, of knowing God, Christianity becomes very dried up indeed.

This coming Lent, I therefore invite you into deeper prayer and reflection, that we too may be slowly transfigured into the glorious body of Christ. For as the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglican writer C. S. Lewis expressed it in *Mere Christianity*: God 'said (in the Bible: Psalm 82.6) that we were "gods" and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to Him perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said.' Amen.