

BISHOP GEOFFREY ROWELL'S SERMON AT THE EUCHARIST WITH
CONFIRMATION, ST THOMAS BECKET CHURCH, HAMBURG,
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LIGHT SHINING OUT OF DARKNESS

**SUNG EUCHARIST AND CONFIRMATION, ST THOMAS BECKET, HAMBURG,
SUNDAY BEFORE LENT, 2012**

“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.”

(II Corinthians 4.6)

At the beginning of the nineteenth-century, in the forests of the south of Russia, lived one of the most remarkable of Russian Christians. He is known to us as St Seraphim of Sarov, and the Russian Church likes to remember him in its ikons as dressed in monastic habit; wearing the stole of priesthood; and carrying the *vervitzza*, or prayer-rope, which is given to monks at their profession with the words: ‘Take brother....the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, for continued prayer to Jesus: for you must always have the name of the Lord Jesus in mind, in heart, and on your lips, saying “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner”.’ Seraphim prayed that prayer, prayed it deeply in his heart and with his whole being, and as he prayed he was changed – transfigured - and knew what St Paul was talking about when he wrote those words to the Christians of Corinth with which I began. *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.*

There is a wonderful story of a young man called Motivilov who went to see Seraphim to ask him how to pray. Seraphim took him deep into the snow-covered forest, and they came to a clearing in the trees, and Seraphim began to pray that simple prayer, that is known as the Jesus Prayer. As he prayed his face became dazzling and light filled the forest, and the white snow became so brilliant that the young man could not look at it, nor the face of the Seraphim himself. Do not be afraid, said Seraphim, you too are shining with the same light, and his face was changed and transfigured. The glory of God shone from one to the other; their lives were transformed, the whole creation was transformed, by the glory of God seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

Our readings today centre around that mysterious event in the Gospels which we call the 'Transfiguration'. The Greek word for Transfiguration is μεταμορφωσις – a change of form, a word we still use to describe the changing of a grub or caterpillar into the beauty of a butterfly or moth. That change is a hidden one, the grub makes a chrysalis, and then when the transformation is complete the chrysalis is broken open and the glorious butterfly emerges. I remember watching fascinated on a visit to a wonderful tropical garden in Costa Rica, where they bred some of the most amazing and dazzling butterflies I have ever seen, as a butterfly with shimmering turquoise wings made its way out of the brittle, brown chrysalis.

The Feast of the Transfiguration falls in August, on August 6th, forty days before the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 14th. It began in the Eastern Church and only gradually spread to the West. In St Luke's account of the Transfiguration, unlike Mark's, which was our Gospel this morning, the two Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, speak with Jesus 'of his departure (his *exodus*) which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.' The Transfiguration, this vision on the mountain of the glory of Jesus, thus points forward to what is to happen in Jerusalem – his crucifixion, suffering, death and resurrection. The Eastern churches underline this by singing the anthems of the Exaltation of the Cross on the Feast of the Transfiguration and on the forty days that follow. The revelation of Jesus in glory points forward to the 'glorification' of Jesus, the revelation of the love of God which goes to the uttermost and comes down to the lowest part of our need in the outstretched arms pinned in sacrifice and offering to the wood of the Cross.

As we come this Sunday to the week in which Lent begins, and our own journey to Holy Week and Easter the Gospel of the Transfiguration is read, and we are reminded of what our Christian life is about – in St Paul's words to be 'transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.' This is, as one of the Eastern Fathers puts it, 'the heavenly vision that will renew our spiritual nature and transform us into his own likeness.' The disciples who went with Jesus up the mountain were, as

the Second Letter of Peter puts it, ‘eyewitnesses of his majesty.’ In this moment of revelation they saw who and what Jesus was.

They saw Jesus *in* glory, they saw the glory *of* Jesus. The bright cloud which overshadows them – the same cloud into which in the Old Testament story Moses went to commune with God – was what was called the *shekinah* – the dazzling radiance of God’s glory, a cloud which both conceals and reveals. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, who wrote one of his greatest books on the transfiguration, reminds us that glory in the Bible means fundamentally the weight, or character, or very being of something. The glory of God is who he is. When St John says of the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ, that ‘we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth,’ he is saying that we see in Jesus the one in whom God is made known to us in human terms. In showing us our true humanity, as made in the image and likeness of God, he shows us no less the God of total, self-giving love in whose image we are made. On the mountain of the transfiguration it is not just Jesus and Moses and Elijah who are overshadowed by the cloud of the divine glory, but the disciples. In St Luke’s Gospel the Blessed Virgin, when the angel Gabriel speaks of God’s call to her to be the mother of the Saviour of the world, and she asks how this can be, she is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and the power of the most high will *overshadow* her. She is to become the God-bearer – and that, of course, is our Christian vocation also. The Second Letter of Peter points us to the greatness of our human destiny – that we are *to become partakers of the divine nature*. In Jesus Christ, in whom the divine glory is revealed, in whom we see and know the God who made us for himself, we are called to ‘his own glory and excellence’. We are called to be transformed into his likeness, and to become ‘partakers of the divine nature.’ As St Maximus the Confessor put it, ‘we are to become by grace, what he (Christ) is by nature.’

All this is – and only is – by the energising, transforming gift and life of the Holy Spirit. Lancelot Andrewes knew well that this was the heart of the matter. In his great Pentecost sermons he speaks of how Pentecost – Whitsun – is about ‘God in us’ as the fulfilment of Christmas – ‘God with us’. The ‘perfect gift’ which God gives us is the gift of his own life, the gift of the Holy Spirit. ‘For to “be partakers of the divine nature” is all the perfection we can attain.....to be made partakers of the Spirit, is to be made partakers ‘of the divine nature’.... Partakers of the Spirit we are, by receiving grace,

which is nothing else but the breath of the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of grace.’ It is by this life-giving Spirit, the ‘Love divine, all loves excelling; the joy of heaven to earth come down’ that Christ is formed in us, and we are enabled to live his life in the world, until as Charles Wesley puts it:

*Changed from glory into glory
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.*

As we stand on the verge of another Lent, we are brought to the mountain of transfiguration, and are encouraged by that vision, - that foretaste of the glory of the resurrection and the life of the world to come, which in the Creed we confess that we ‘look for’ (literally ‘wait with longing expectation for’). We are encouraged to see our lives in the light of Christ, and the whole world seen in a new way in that light. This was powerfully put by the poet, Edwin Muir, in his poem entitled simply ‘The Transfiguration.’

*So from the ground we felt that virtue branch
Through all our veins till we were whole, our wrists
As fresh and pure as water from a well,
Our hands made new to handle holy things,
The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed
Till earth and light and water entering tghere
Gave back to us the clear unfallen world.*

Muir’s poem speaks of a world transformed, and eyes seeing the glory of God in all that is. It is an encouragement to us to see what Hopkins called ‘the dearest freshness deep down things’ and to care for that world; and to see the wounds and scars which we bear, and which we encounter in others, as wounds which can be transfigured and not fester.

In this sacrament we come to receive in the simplest signs of bread and wine no less than Christ the Lord of glory. And as we come that he may dwell in us and we in

him, let us remember that the Christian East which has rightly seen the Transfiguration as the theme of Christian life, uses the same word *metamorphosis* to speak of how the outpouring of the Spirit makes these simple things, bread and wine, into the Body and Blood of Christ. So in coming to receive communion, we come to the mount of Transfiguration, that our lives may be so touched and changed that something of the glory of God may be seen in us.
