

Transfiguration

To Bear the Beams of Love

Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

WHITCHURCH CANONICORUM, A TINY VILLAGE IN WEST DORSET, ENGLAND, IS A SACRED PLACE FOR me. The ancient parish church is the only one in England which still contains the bones of its patron saint, Saint Candida, and it has attracted pilgrims seeking healing for well over a thousand years. It lies hidden deep in the folds of the beautiful Dorset hills, and whenever I visit my family I go on pilgrimage to the church. I know that God's presence is everywhere, in the hills and woods and meadows of that lovely place, but I long to go inside the church and kneel down and pray. There, the presence of God is palpable, and I always feel in some way changed, blessed, transformed after my visit.

I was recently sitting quietly in our chapel at Emery House, looking out across the meadow towards the river. I was praying for the work of renovation and restoration in which we are engaged at the Monastery in Cambridge. As I sat in the chapel I remembered that it is dedicated to the Transfiguration, and I gave thanks to God for the power of sacred places to open us to the grace and power of God, to transform and transfigure us, to change us, as St Paul says, "from one degree of glory to another." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Charles Wesley paraphrases this Pauline promise into those wonderful words in his hymn: "Changed from glory into glory / Till in heaven we take our place." Over the years that I have been a monk, I have had the immense privilege of seeing the miracle of transformation in many people's lives. In some extraordinary way, both Emery House and the monastery have become for many, sacred places, places of divine encounter and transformation "from glory into glory." By the grace of God, these places allow us to catch a glimpse of God's glory.

It is good for us to seek out sacred places, places where God seems quite close, since our world often seems increasingly frenetic and complex. It can feel unsafe and even hostile. We seek out places where we may go to be 'held': held by the physical stone and bricks, held by prayer, held by the beauty of worship and the power of silence. We seek out places where it is safe to bring our pain and suffering, safe to open ourselves up to God and allow God's healing and renewing love to fill us and transform us. Times of retreat are important for the same reason that sacred places are: we need times away from the hectic and harried pace of life, so that we can attend more fully and completely to the transformative love of God. I often say to someone at the start of a few days of retreat, to begin by spending some time praying before the cross, and to consciously lay at the foot of the cross all the cares and burdens which

they have brought with them, and to leave them there. When it is time for them to go back into the world and take up their burdens again, so often, miraculously and wonderfully, they recognize that the burdens are much lighter. Some they are just able to leave behind!

This movement toward God and then back out into the world is the fundamental rhythm that allows for and marks the work of transformation. Look to the story of Jesus' transfiguration, one of the key scenes in his ministry and the revelation of his identity as the chosen one of God. In the Gospels we read that, "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves." (Mark 9:2). They go away from the world, to a mountaintop, where they can be alone with each other and with God, almost as for a time of retreat. In that sacred place, they see Jesus transfigured before them, and his clothes become dazzling white. This divine encounter changed not just Jesus, but the disciples too. The disciples were granted the grace to see Jesus transfigured in glory and majesty, reflecting the glory of God. "It is good that we are here," they say, and perhaps we can sympathize that they would want to stay up on the mountaintop, where God seems quite near. But the gift of vision and insight that the Transfiguration imparts to them and to Jesus comes not as a good in itself, but rather in order to strengthen them all for the trials that still lie ahead. Indeed, in the Gospel account, the moment the group comes down from the mountain they are met by excited crowds and a boy thrown into convulsions, rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth. The world returns, with all its hectic care, but the disciples are strengthened and ready to deal with it, because of their time on the mountaintop with Jesus. The Transfiguration readied them all for the work of transformation demanded by the crowds and the epileptic boy waiting below. Their theophany, or encounter with God, had readied them for the mission God had prepared them to undertake.

The interplay between theophany and mission revealed in this scene of the Transfiguration is true throughout the Scriptures. Whenever God calls someone, he calls them with a distinct purpose. Isaiah encounters the glory of God, Moses sees the burning bush, Jacob has a vision of angels ascending and descending; like the Transfiguration, these are experiences of theophany, of encounter with God. But God never lets it stop there. Once God has transfigured the individual through this exposure to his glory, he directly sends them out to do something: "Go and set my people free." He always calls us for a purpose, a purpose that usually involves sending us out into the world. God comes to us to transform us, so that we can take part in God's transforming work of redemption, to help bring about God's kingdom.

The famous Trappist monk Thomas Merton tells a remarkable story that bears upon this connection between theophany, transformation, and mission. He speaks of an experience he had on March 18, 1958. He was standing at a street corner in downtown Louisville, when something happened which changed his life. It was an ordinary day and ordinary people were going about their business. But as he looked at them they suddenly changed. He wrote, "I

was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people ... I saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the person that each one is in God's eyes. To me," he writes, "they seemed to be walking around shining like the sun." He went on to wonder what the world would be like if we could all see each other as we really are, as was revealed to him in this shining moment. He muses, "I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other!" Merton had been granted a rare moment of clarity, in which he saw the people around him transfigured, as Jesus was, ablaze with the glory of God. And his response to this amazing moment is the one to which we are all called by Christ; his response was love for them.

Thomas Merton's epiphany through which he experienced this love for the people he saw on the street must have been like peering, for a moment, through God's eyes, and seeing each individual as precious and worthy of love. While the intensity of this moment was extraordinary for Merton, as it would be for any of us, one of the key points about Merton's visionary moment is actually that it occurred in a very ordinary place, an ordinary street corner traversed by ordinary people. It wasn't any special day; he wasn't in a sacred place. Merton's visionary experience arose out of the ordinary circumstances of this life, and so it suggests how the ordinary is actually extraordinary if only we had the eyes to see it. When our eyes adjust, even a bit, the very ordinary people and things that we hardly notice can suddenly become transfigured with God's glory. So Julian of Norwich, the English mystic, tells how she suddenly saw the whole world within a hazelnut. And Moses, in his biblical theophany, saw an ordinary bush flame up with the glory of the Lord.

Moments of transfiguration—whether Merton's or Moses'—reveal the sacramental nature of the world that surrounds us. An ordinary bush, like an ordinary street corner, can become an instrument for the encounter with God, just as in the sacraments, ordinary objects like bread and wine and water become charged with God's transformative power. In fact, the whole of creation can reveal God to us in this sacramental way. While we may seek out sacred places, because they 'tune' us more readily to experience God's presence, God is not limited to these distinct places. God can just as well be seen on the street corner as at the cathedral. Thus the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, shares his vision that "The world is charged with the grandeur of God / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil." He had a vision of God's glory, shimmering everywhere, like shook foil. If we can but learn to see it, everywhere we look is ablaze with the glory of God!

The good news is that we can learn to see this glory. All of us can develop our inner eye simply by practicing the presence of God. And this practice, like the vision it can help us to develop, comes about in ordinary places, through ordinary activities. We don't have to go to the Monastery, or the mountaintop, or any particular place. Jesus tells us, "Go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who sees in secret." (Matthew 6:6) Practicing the presence of God simply means spending time in prayer and being still before God. This

practice attunes our inner eye to see the world as full of God's glory, to see other people as shot through with God's love. Spending time with God, we learn to see as God sees.

I have a place in my own cell, a corner, which I set apart for this daily time with God. I always sit in a particular chair that I set aside for prayer; I light a candle; I have an icon and a cross. Because I've set it apart for God, I approach this place now with a sense of expectation and a certain amount of awe. Conscious that I am entering into the presence of God, I cross a sort of threshold in awareness as soon as I approach that corner. I come into that place, very consciously, not only aware that I am coming into the presence of God, but also aware that God is already there waiting for me, full of expectancy. The Psalms tell us that God actually 'delights' in us (Psalm 18: v. 19), and so I believe that God delights in me when I come to that place of encounter. I don't have to do much more than that; I just have to show up, full of expectancy that God is there waiting for me, even more, that God ultimately has drawn and invited me to that place and that time of encounter.

If you find yourself struggling with distraction during your time with God, you might say over to yourself a Psalm that helps you to become centered. I sometimes say, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:v.11) or "O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you." (Psalm 63:v.1) Once the repeated phrase has helped to still you, then you can simply sit and wait in the presence of God, listening for the voice of God in the stillness. Usually, I like to turn at this point to the ancient way of monastic praying with Scripture called *lectio divina*. I'll read a short passage of Scripture to myself very slowly. Recently I have been reading from the Gospel of John, Psalm 139, and from Isaiah chapters 40-45. I will read the passage over several times, and wait for the Holy Spirit to cause a word or phrase to, as it were, 'leap off the page'. I will then repeat that phrase over and over again, meditatively, and I'll let it sink down within me so that it really soaks my roots. I receive that 'word' as God's gift to me that day, and the gift of the word prompts me to a time of prayer and thanksgiving. *Lectio divina* can be a powerful way to hear God's word speaking directly to our heart.

However you like to pray, whether through *lectio divina*, or silent contemplation of an icon, the important fact about this practice of the presence of God is that we are not the ones in the driving seat. Our transformation is wrought by God, and is not 'ego driven'. We cannot make transfiguration happen. We can only place ourselves in the presence of God and allow God's wonderful work of grace to happen to us. But we do need to turn up! I sometimes rather humorously suggest that it's rather like getting a sun tan. All you have to do is lie in the sun and the sun will do everything else. But you do have to actually lie there. So too with prayer, we do have to 'turn up', faithfully and expectantly placing ourselves in God's presence, to give that time over to God. Even if you don't feel anything, or you don't think you're in the right mood, just show up and stay there. Turn yourself toward God's light and let God do the rest!

When we turn ourselves toward God, we soak in the rays of God's transforming light. The poet, William Blake writes, "And we are put on earth a little space, / That we may learn to bear the beams of love." In that moment on the mountaintop, Jesus shone with the beams of the love from the Father, until even his garments blazed white as light. And Moses comes down from an encounter with God on Mt. Sinai shining so brightly that he had to cover his face with a veil, for the Israelites could not bear to look upon him. For most of us, this transfiguration will be a much more hidden experience, even unseen, for the transformation will happen within. Yet as we turn again and again toward the beams of God's love, we too will begin to bear those beams of love back out into the world.

That is the ultimate goal of our life: we aim to be transformed by the glory of God, in order to transform the world. Saint Irenaeus wrote that each one of us was made in the image and likeness of God, yet that in consequence of the Fall, we lost that likeness. But while we may have lost the likeness, he is quite clear that we never lost our divine image, our *imago Dei*. Each of us still holds within us the image of God. One of the mysteries of Christian transformation is that as we ourselves are changed more and more into the likeness of Christ, so our own vision changes. We begin to see others in a new light. Just as Merton's visionary moment revealed to him, we can begin to see others more as God sees them. We begin to see more clearly the indelible image of God in them. So Irenaeus writes those wonderful words, "*Gloria Dei homo vivens*": "the glory of God is a person fully alive." We participate in this glory when we allow ourselves to be renewed in God's image, to know ourselves as made in God's image. This awareness, in turn, retunes our inner vision, to allow us to see other people as God sees them. Only then can we serve the greater glory of God, as we help to bring others more fully to life. *Gloria Dei homo vivens*.

If we want to transform the world, then we have to allow ourselves to be transformed by God. So the life of discipleship is a constant movement between seeking the presence of God for renewal and transformation, and then going out to bring that transforming love to the world. God's world—the torn canvass of God's beautiful creation—needs mending. We are called to mend it, to bring healing, and to give new hope. At the end of the celebration of the Eucharist we are charged to, "Go forth into the world." We who have been transfigured by the Sacrament of the Eucharist are called to take our new peace and hope out into the world. The last words which Jesus speaks at the end of Matthew's gospel calls us to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them." We are commissioned, sent out, to "bear the beams of love" to the whole world.

As large as this commission sounds, it is accomplished through the small and daily work of prayer. If we are not transfigured every day by God, then the world will disfigure us. The world's message is not one of God's redemption and transforming love. We need to allow God to continue the daily work of transformation—to transfigure us—lest the world disfigure us by leading us away from the vision to which we've been called. Every day, we make a new

beginning; we come to God again and allow Him to forgive us, to renew us, to transform us, so that we can become agents of God's transformation in the world.

Taking daily time with God retunes our inner vision to enable us to see other people as God sees them, as charged with God's glory. "In your light we see light" (Ps 36:9). Turn yourself, as Jesus did, to that light. And then bear the beams of God's love.

Texts for Further Reflection

"God's Grandeur" - Gerard Manley Hopkins

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” – Charles Wesley

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation;
Enter every trembling heart.*

*Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit,
Into every troubled breast!
Let us all in Thee inherit;
Let us find that second rest.
Take away our bent to sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its Beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.*

*Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy life receive;
Suddenly return and never,
Never more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
Pray and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.*

*Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
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.*

Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE was born in Wales and studied theology at Cambridge University before training to be a priest at Westcott House theological college. He came to the United States fifteen years ago to join SSJE and has pursued a ministry of teaching, spiritual direction, and retreat leading, and for three years he served as chaplain to the House of Bishops. Before coming to SSJE he served as a parish priest in the diocese of St. Albans, as well as the head of the department of theology at Oundle School, a large Anglican high school in the English Midlands.

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Reconciliation

Preparing for the Sacrament

Resurrection

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Time

Redeeming the Gift

Transfiguration

To Bear the Beams of Love

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