

## The Feast of the Transfiguration, 2023

Today the Church keeps the Feast of the Transfiguration it being the 6<sup>th</sup> of August. In the Orthodox Church the Transfiguration is ranked as one of the Twelve Great Feasts. There it is celebrated with an all-night vigil beginning on the eve of the feast. On that day believers will customarily bring grapes to their churches to be blessed after the service.

Since 1945 with the dropping of the first atomic bomb the feast has a bitter taste added, which we cannot hide from. On the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1945 the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and three days later on Nagasaki. The reasoning was to bring the war to a swift end and spare Allied troops. It ushered in the Cold War and the threat that hung over the world and hangs over the world today with the war in Ukraine.

This summer's landscape has been marked by the phenomenon of Barbenheimer. Barbenheimer being derived from the names of the two hyped summer film releases *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*. Part of the hype around these two films is the hope that they will rescue the film industry as we know it from dissolution. Oppenheimer was an American theoretical physicist and director of the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos Laboratory during World War II. He became known as 'the father of the atomic bomb'. The dropping of the atomic bomb can obscure this feast as we are forced to acknowledge that swords aren't being beaten into ploughshares and as we humans are becoming an ever greater threat to human life: AI, climate and nuclear war.

For many the Feast of the Transfiguration will be best known through the icons of the Orthodox Church or as the gospel set to be read on the Sunday before Lent, as the Transfiguration marks a turning point in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke as Jesus leaves the Galilean ministry to set his face towards Jerusalem. Finally, it would be Michael Ramsey, the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury, who would become a catalyst for it being more fully appreciated in the Church of England and therefore within the Anglican Communion.

In his book, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (1949) Ramsey wrote, 'The transfiguration stands as a gateway to the saving events of the gospel, and is a mirror in which the Christian mystery is seen in its unity. Here we perceive that the living and the dead are one in Christ, that the old covenant and the new are inseparable, that the Cross and the glory are of one, that the age to come is already here, that our human nature has a destiny of glory, that in Christ the final word is uttered and in him alone the Father is well pleased. Here the diverse elements in the theology of the New Testament meet.'

In those few sentences Ramsey sets before the reader and us today the grand vision, which is so much more than what John Lennon serves up in his song entitled *God* and of which I spoke last Sunday. In the song *God* Lennon states that what he believes is himself, Yoko and himself stating that this is reality. Well, John, we don't agree. Elsewhere in *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* Ramsey writes, 'Again and again God judged Israel for ascribing glory not to Him but to herself...' Lennon in essence does the same ending up with himself. Yoko gets a mention, but his son doesn't.

There is a lot to unpack in Ramsey's concise summary. Let us briefly break it down a little. Ramsey speaks of the Transfiguration as a gateway to the saving events of the gospel, but for him it is not only a gateway, something through which we go, but it is also a mirror 'in which the Christian mystery is seen in its unity.' To cherish unity we need to see how things seemingly at odds with one other are in truth one. So let us pass through the gateway and see the unity of which Ramsey writes.

The first unity is that of the living and the dead in Christ and through Christ. These belong to each other in Christ. They are in relationship to each other as they are in the Transfiguration. The dead are obviously Moses and Elijah, but here much alive. Both are significant persons in different ways. Moses as the lawgiver and a prophet. Elijah who not having suffered death is taken up in the whirlwind. It is Elijah who is expected to return and with his return make known that the time for the Messiah has come.

In the icons of the Orthodox Church Moses and Elijah are seen conversing with Jesus at the same level. The Kingdom of which Jesus teaches is a place of fellowship. It is a place of encounter and exchange as exemplified in the best examples of human conversations. At Jesus' feet we see the disciples Peter, James and John, who shrink from what is transpiring out of fear, but in that moment are told of Jesus' upcoming Exodus, whereby he will overcome the chain of sin and the oppression of death for the glorious liberation of the children of God.

The second unity is of the old and the new covenants. It is true that the Old Covenant can stand on its own, as it does, but on its own it remains incomplete. It is through the giving of the Son and the giving of the Holy Spirit that the Old finds its completion in the New. It is clear that the Old Testament, the covenants and the prophecies, as well as the history of the people whom God chose for himself look forward to the fulfilment of God's purposes as we read in the Book of Daniel. The purpose of God in Jesus is that

'The one like a son of man received dominion, glory, and kingship; all peoples, nations, and languages serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed.' (Daniel 7:14)

Here it is made clear that the Son comes for all. He comes for all peoples, nations, and languages. Daniel's vision of all peoples, nations, and languages is weighted towards community, fellowship and the group and not towards the individual. Identity is found and deepened in these human assemblies and not apart from them. As a church community we have spent time considering the covenants (Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic and Davidic) and how these are being fulfilled in Christ and are also superseded by the New Covenant of Christ in His blood. Paul knows that Jesus comes for all which must and does include the Hebrew people, but extends it to include in Daniel's words all peoples, nations, and languages, as Jesus has already done in the Great Commission. And what they do, all these people, is to serve God with all their heart, with all their mind, with all their soul, and with all their strength.

Ramsey still speaking of unity invites us to see how the cross and the glory are one, as the New Testament does, writing, 'Here (through the Transfiguration) we perceive... that the Cross and the glory are of one'. This certainly needs unpacking, as it seems strange to our ears. It is through the cross on which hung the Saviour of the world and on which he died that we come to understand the lengths to which God goes in Christ to bring us, those made in his image, into the reality of salvation, but also to 'fit us for heaven' in the words of the Christmas carol *Away in a Manger*:

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay  
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.  
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,  
And fit us for heaven, to live with thee there.

Fit us for heaven. This is what God is doing. We are being transformed by his grace. As I already shared with Andrew and Melitta I recently attended a service in the city centre. The preacher said on that occasion, Die Sinne sind wach, aber die Seele schläft, which I translate, The senses are awake, but the soul is asleep. We all know this to be true in some form or other be it eating or drinking too much, exercising too little, being given to laziness etc. We need God to fit us so that we may live well in the bodies that we are given, but we are to do so according to God's ordinances with a good portion of self-restraint and far less self-indulgence, not only for our good, but the good and benefit of others. Matt Reman in a worship song writes,

Wake up my soul and bless your God  
Turn every sense to praise  
And sweetly speak His holy name  
...  
Who blesses all your ways

Let us by calling on the Holy Spirit wake our sleeping souls to the praise and praises of God.

God's glory at a cursory glance does not shine forth from the cross, but it is through the stark reality of the cross and what it stands for, by penetrating its deeper significance, its meaning, we come to see the glory of God. How does John the Evangelist put it? (John 3.16) 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' And Paul? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, ... (Romans 8.32) God does not spare his Son. The glory of Christ is found in the complete devotion (Hingabe) of God for us and to us his creatures that is forever only partially open to our comprehension as mortals. 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.' (1 Corinthians 13:12)

There is something grievous even terrible about our turning from God that it requires the greatest act of God to make it clear how grievous our sin is. We fail to take our estrangement from God, our sin seriously. Both John and Paul go on to indicate that we, Gentiles and Jews, are the beneficiaries of this complete self-giving of God, His sacrifice.

It is of more than a little interest that neither John nor Paul leave it there. John when he continues, 'so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' Paul is even more exuberant writing, 'will he not with him also give us everything else?' Which the Book of Common Prayer (1662) echoes in the phrase 'and all other benefits of his passion', as in, that 'we and all the whole Church may obtain remission of our sins and all other benefits of his passion'.

I must draw to a swift close. My time is up and I haven't addressed the second half of Ramsey's summary, '... that the age to come is already here, that our human nature has a destiny of glory, that in Christ the final word is uttered and in him alone the Father is well pleased.' All these are as important as the things I did address. The Christian faith has a vision and it is a compelling vision. New challenges arise for each generation, but what Ramsey underlines in his succinct summary of the Transfiguration based on thorough biblical reasoning, nurtured in the apostolic faith, is the revealed truth to which all are to bend the knee, have life and raise their arms in thanksgiving.

Wake up my soul and bless your God, turn every sense to praise.  
And sweetly speak His holy name, who blesses all your ways. **Amen.**