

Transfiguration | Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21 | LUMC | Feb 19, 2023

Dear Church Family and Friends: in the last few weeks Paul and Matthew, both using Jesus' narrative, defined the relationship between God and humanity—the traits of genuine Christians and their faith Journey. Paul speaks bluntly when identifying mature Christians and non-mature Christians. He warns that failure to grow in faith causes Christians to backslide because of the tendency of all humans toward evil practices.

Today's readings remind me of my childhood expectations. We lived in the country, but not far from a big city. My mum would go to the city once or twice a week, either to sell farm produce or to buy household food like salt or sugar. Any day mum went to the city, we siblings expected her to buy us sweets or biscuits. Whenever she said she was going to the city we were excited and anticipated something exciting, refreshing, something foreign yet fulfilling. Mum never disappointed us one single city visit.

So was Jesus with his disciples. When Jesus was transformed and appeared in glory, he was encouraging believers to live in Christ's glory now, and to anticipate living in it fully in the future. The three disciples experienced that glory, and expressed their feelings and hopes of living their lives in that magnificent setting. This was especially so with Peter, who did not want to let go of the experience. He voiced his desire to stay in that splendid life on the mountain. He literally proposed to construct three tents so they could stay in that sublime environment. Jesus objected, saying, "This is only a glimpse. You are partly living in glory now, but you need to anticipate living in full glory in the future". Jesus' transformed life encourages us to likewise live a transformed life, and gives us hope of experiencing it fully in Christ's second coming.

In last week's reading, Jesus spoke to us about being true disciples, being mature in faith by practicing that faith daily, and letting others see our light—bold actions of faith that encourage praise of the living God. Jesus' transformation confirmed how the Old and New Testaments merge together to build a Christian character. That is why Moses and Elijah are in the mix; each of these three figures represents God's historical movements of caring for humanity. Moses received the law and gathered slaves together and then led them to freedom. Elijah represented the prophetic epic time when people were loath of hearing God's message through the prophets. People had begun to esteem idols like Baal, worshipped in other tribes and cultures.

Jesus and his disciples also appeared when people were weary of Roman leadership, and society was divided into 'haves' and 'have nots', just like in our time! At the time, it was not shameful to abide with sins. People were over their heads, like in today's world when most Christians prefer a preacher who will not preach sins, " In his transformed life, Jesus' wish is to bring light to shine in every heart living in this dark, sinful world.

We live in the age of science that possibly makes our brain hard to conceive Christ's transfiguration. That's because, from a purely scientific perspective, a person cannot shine like the sun nor their clothes outshine their original color. A scientific mind would quickly dismiss the transfiguration as a magic spell and therefore, nothing much.

In the same way science casts doubt on dreams and visions, and simply describes them as the reorganizing of the day's information that had not been properly stored in the brain. The information shifts when the brain is at rest during sleep. The scientific interpretation of visions and dreams minimizes most Biblical experiences, including the virgin birth. Science, though not all bad, can and does affect thought systems, and casts doubt on any intangible or unexplainable thing. Being aware that we are products of science, where does that leave us in matters of faith? How do we perceive Jesus' transfiguration, and how can we practice its teachings?

I have also found that those who try to explain their encounter with Christ through visions are often doubted. I met a newly saved Christian in a mental ward. The contention was explaining his vision that appeared to some family members as a psychological issue. They swiftly brought him to the hospital because the family has a history of mental illness.

Friends, we need to stand our ground as we explain ourselves in the midst of scientific concepts and the doubts of unbelievers. Threats to our faith abound in all directions. Jesus knew this would happen when he said, "They will bring you to court for my name's sake"¹. The worldly court is widespread and oppressive.

The transfiguration can make it awkward for believers because they are only the true Christians. The vision of being Christ-like is only for those who deny themselves. To deny oneself is not equal to self-denial. It means giving up control of yourself completely, convincing yourself that the human-self in you has no place. You take up Christ's teachings willingly, enduring ridicule, shame, suffering or even death for Christ's sake. When Jesus asked the disciples who witnessed his transfiguration to go back down the mountain with him, he was assuring them to witness for him without fear, overcoming their own sense of self, and devoting themselves fully to being in Christ and doing his mission.

Do we experience Jesus in our lives the same as the disciples? Yes, most Christians do. The dilemma is being fearful of explaining the experience that might cost them.

A neighbor prayed loudly and their next neighbor called the police saying their peace was being disturbed. The Christian may have been wrong, but if the neighbor cared about faith, he would have approached the disturbing neighbor, asking them to tone it down.

Another family member spoke of experiencing a vision, and the family brought the person to the hospital for mental treatment.

A church member received a gift of speaking in tongues and church leaders thought the person was seeking handouts because he was a person of limited means. They brought him gifts and told him to stop speaking in tongues at church. He agreed but could resist the Spirit's promptings for only a week. The following week the Spirit

¹ Luke 21:12; Matthew 10:18

impelled him to speak in tongues, and he did so, leaving the leaders without any other option.

Yes, those who are transformed live in the light of the Word despite the temptations from their dark world.

Are you encouraged? Please feel encouraged to follow Christ wherever Christ leads.

The light of Christ shines in our hearts, overcoming the dark world around us. We are transfigured to live in the light of the Gospel. We have studied the Word and given heed to its teachings in our heart. We have put aside the evils and promised to live in the light of the Word. We are in essence transformed and set apart from those who have not heard to “heed the teachings of Christ” in their hearts.

Being transformed does not mean living in a world without sin. I hope most of you know the history of the Sweden by John Calvin. He was set to create a holy city and taught inhabitants to be holy and to practice holiness from the church doors to city hall and everywhere in between. Everyone was supposed to be Christlike. Rules were set to guide everyone living in the city.

In time he realized that most people were being disciplined for violating the rules that were designed to promote holiness. Calvin, searching how to handle the messy situation, read the verse, “Let wheat and chaff grow together and during harvest, they will be separated.”² He changed his teachings and allowed those on discipline to have a voice.

I often use this example to remind ourselves that we are living in a dark world and are constantly being tempted to enjoy our sins. Our only reprieve is to heed Christ’s teachings in our hearts, bearing in mind that the Word is the only thing that sends light into the darkness (evils) around us. We are transformed by the Word and ought to live differently. We must, without fear of prejudice, practice our faith and be seen in that light.

Those who live in the Word will feel the need to keep that Word alive despite all else, like Peter did. St Peter felt transformed by the Word and promised to live the Word. However he did not want to live out the holiness scene back in real life. He preferred to remain on the mountain. But Jesus reminded him that he was receiving the vision and that he must go to tell others by his lifestyle, not necessarily using words.

Jesus asks those who catch his vision of creating a better world, to preach it by mixing with sinners, and being the beamer of light and hope to a perishing world. He told the three disciples (and in essence ourselves) to teach the Word and practice the Word in the world. The three disciples did not believe blindly but had witnessed the grandeur of Jesus being glorified and shining.

We too have heard the voice confirming that Jesus is not only human but also the authentic son of God. Jesus is God with us. We experience him psychologically,

² Matthew13:30

emotionally, and spiritually changing us. We just need to catch the vision, remain alive, and live active Christian lives. Amen.