

The Transfiguration Luke 9

Let's begin with the picture. It's by Raphael, left unfinished at his death in 1520. A small reproduction does it no favours. The original is over 13 foot high. It was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de Medici (later he became Pope Clement VII and refused Henry VIII a divorce), and the original is in the Vatican. The Cardinal actually commissioned two paintings from two artists and Raphael decided this was a competition. This picture is the one you are supposed remember. There is ambition and legacy here, Raphael died before it was quite finished.

It is a picture of the Transfiguration. What Luke described, Raphael painted. And it is a tricky picture to look at. Just imagine for a moment you are at home watching television. When you watch television you look in two different ways. You can see the television screen: *War and Peace* the Battle of Borodino, carnage... and you can see your own room, coffee cups, a sleeping cat, a jigsaw. Think of this picture like that.

Start at the top of the picture. It is a mountain and mountains, in the bible, are places where you meet God. Moses climbs Sinai to hear God speak. Elijah goes up Horeb to hear the still small voice. They are very particular places. New Testament Jews did not buy sensible shoes and go fell-walking; they stayed firmly on the valley floor. Mountains are places where you are afraid. When the Psalmist looks at the hills he is frightened

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? Psalm 121:1

At the top of this picture, you are looking clear into holiness and glory. Luke really wants us to know that the mountain was holy. Alone of the evangelists Luke tells us that Jesus went to the mountain to *pray*. And Raphael paints that. Christ is there as our high priest praying. Watch the priest at the altar later – it will be the same position. This is Jesus praying as priests pray, at heaven's altar.

His clothes are white. Luke and Matthew both tell us that. Mark gets emphatic, he insists on telling us that Jesus was *dazzling*, (notice the disciples have to shield their eyes). here is some very deliberate story-telling going on. Luke and Matthew both tell us that Jesus' face was changed and that it shone. They write that because they want us to remember a story about Moses who came down from Sinai having talked with God, his face was so bright with glory he had to wear a veil. Mark says something else. In Mark, it is Jesus' *clothes* that are white because Mark is thinking of another famous scene, one from the book of Daniel.

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow... his throne was fiery flames.

Daniel 7:9

So, at the top of this picture you are looking at what cannot be seen. You are looking straight into heaven. What we see on this mountain is the Ancient One, God himself. Either side of Jesus we see Moses and Elijah. They are the two prophets who ascended bodily into heaven. Standing now with Jesus they tell us that

we are looking at something we have no right to see – notice Jesus does not look at them, they look at him. Jesus is the focus, look at him and you look on the face of God.

Heaven is torn open, as it was at the Baptism, and God himself speaks, precisely as he spoke at the baptism.

This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him

Mark 1:11

Raphael wants us to see how startling and overwhelming the moment was. Look at the disciples flattened to the ground. Look at the brilliant open heaven. We must not miss the point. In Christ we look at what we never hoped to see, we look at God. You are looking at what the Christian faith teaches. In Jesus we see God. Jesus is what we have to say about God. Jesus is *all* we have to say God.

Jesus is all we have to say about God. That is our faith. Now, turn that statement round. Everything we can say about God is seen in this human life. Your life, my life is the place where we meet God. The God of heaven has come amongst us.

And that is why you then have to look at the bottom part of the picture. And this bit is not glorious at all. After the Transfiguration, Jesus came down the mountain and stepped into an argument. It is the very next bit of Luke. Three disciples went with him up the mountain, nine stayed behind. There they are, on the left. They tried to cure a boy possessed by demons. They failed. The bottom part of the picture is their failure. You can see the boy (he is bare chested) propped up by his father in the foreground. It is wonderfully done. Look at that dreadful division, the dark space that separates disciples from family and onlookers. Pastoral care and community have broken down, it is all hideous recrimination. Look at the pointing hands, look at the man in the foreground on the left still struggling with the liturgy of exorcism, he was clearly trained at my theological college and he has got the book out. It is a dreadful scene, only the woman, the boy's mother, attempts to bridge the gap between the crowd and the disciples. There is a really clever touch, and you may need to look at the large image later to see it; she alone rests on grass, it is dead ground under everyone else. She kneels, she prays and there is life. Others shout and blame and there is death.

And one last thing; Luke has told us that Moses and Elijah talk to Jesus. They

...were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem Luke 9:31

Look to the right of the picture, there is a city on a hill, it is Jerusalem. It is the place of Jesus departure, in Luke the word is actually *exodus*. There, in the distance, is his goal. This is the journey he will complete and it will kill him.

Jesus did not stay on the mountain. That is what this painting says, Jesus did not stay on the mountain. And neither can we. Holiness like that is almost impossible to see; you can't bear it. Jesus came down the mountain. He took that holiness into the midst of all the doubt and recrimination and he healed the boy. He continued the journey, but the doubt and recrimination did not stop. He died with people

pointing at him, quite literally shouting him down. He had to come down from the mountain. We have to come down from the mountain. And when we do holiness begins to look very different

There are two things that Christians say. We say that Jesus *was made like us*. God was in human flesh. That's the mountain top, the top of the picture. It is not just Jesus, the disciples are there. They have to cover their eyes, but they do it see it. It hurts when they look, but they see human life lifted to God. We know that Jesus is God and yet was made like us. Human life and the life of God held in a single space. That is Jesus, *and us*, up there. *Jesus was made like us*, that is what we say. We really can look like that. There is hope for us, human life really can be lifted up to God.

And then we say something else, Jesus was made like us, *so that we can be made like him*. And that is why we cannot stay on the mountain. We can and will look like that, but we don't. The exodus is not over. There is a way to go. We are not supposed to see glory and feel reassured, we are supposed to look up and realise how far there is to go. Christian vocation is not all about stepping aside for a holy moment; it is not the best bits. Christian vocation is the chaos at the bottom of the picture, the chaos and the recrimination, the conviction that is in *this* humanity, in *this* mess that we will be made what we must be.

The great temptation, the terrible temptation is to think that faith sits on a beach looking at a sunset or climbs a hill to be with God. The great temptation is to think that faith happens somewhere else. It doesn't. It is when we come down the mountain that we live our holiness. In our sickness, and our doubt; when our anger and our ambition rear up; when our appetite and jealousy seduce us and reduce us; that is when we are being made into Christ. Or indeed being made into something else.

Look at the picture. Not one of the people with the little boy in Raphael's picture look up the mountain. It means nothing to them. They want to see holiness here, now, at work where it is needed.

The temptation is to keep looking for something else, something different. The temptation is to feel that you are failing because it is seldom or never the mountain top. I came to this gospel and to the journey down the mountain this week after a raft of meetings. I have talked about the diocesan budget and about the role of the Bishop's Council in governance. I have talked about the future of theological education in Oxford, I have talked about the cathedral budget, the boiler, the brickwork, the café, the school. No mountain tops there, no dazzling whites.

No wonder Peter wanted to build and manage a little shrine half way up the hill. Christians ever since have wanted to potter about in the suburbs of glory. It is tempting and it is wrong. It is the temptation to avoid commitment to avoid the holiness that comes down the mountain because you know it is going to be disappointing, compromised, clumsy.

This morning there is a glimpse of the glory of God. That is the vocation of this building, to be the top of the mountain, to dazzle. Now and again it does that, sometimes it falls woefully short. But our vocation is always to continue the exodus;

to go down the mountain and set out into the chaos. Holiness will be awkward, angular, frustrating because it is a slow business being made into Christ.

Forget keep calm and carry on, that is not the gospel, Raphael knows better. We are the love of God, the redemption of God, we are the glory of God and we will be that transformation in the world. It is really not keep calm and carry on, it is a greater call, a harder commitment, a longer journey. It is Glory and Exodus for us. Changed from glory into glory.

Jesus was made like us, so that we can be made like him