

Transfigured/Transformed [Luke9:28-36]

I have recently read Michael Caine's autobiography. Born Maurice Mickelwhite, he was a cockney working class lad who grew up living in slums in the Elephant and Castle area of London. In his first major film, Zulu, Caine was cast to play the role of Lieutenant Bromhead. The cockney had to play an upper class army officer. By make-up, clothing and changing his voice, Caine was transformed into something or someone he was not.

I have a memory from primary school of performing in a school play. I was assigned the role of a brown cow! Not a leading role but I had to wear brown knitted tights, a brown jumper and a painted mask; an attempt to transform me into something approaching a cow so that I could say my line: "I didn't really mean it. Here's milk for his porridge and butter for his bread".

Transformed to become what I wasn't.

People looking on in both of these scenarios would think or say, that is Michael Caine or Colin Crowhurst playing a part; they are pretending to be something that they are not. Such transformation is only surface skin deep. There is no permanent change.

By contrast, Luke describes for us what we now call the Transfiguration of Jesus. Luke did not witness the events described, but his narrative contains such detail that could only have come from an eye witness; from either Peter, James or John. As John did not include this event in his gospel, it is thought that the source of the story was Peter – Peter being self-deprecating about his actions and speech.

The three disciples were there on a mountain with Jesus and they knew that Jesus was there to pray. During that prayer time the appearance of Jesus' face changed. He was altered. In traditional language, Jesus was transfigured.

The word 'transfigured' comes from the Greek word *metamorphoom* – metamorphosis in English. What happened to Jesus was like the appearance of a butterfly from the cocoon. The real is opened up to show.

The transfigured Jesus was showing who he really was – the truth was allowed to shine through. This was not external transformation; it was internal revelation. Paul tells us in Colossians that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In the transfiguration, what was invisible became visible for the three disciples to witness.

How would we react to such a revelation? As for the disciples, we only know of Peter's reaction. He wanted to build tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. He wanted to stay there, basking in the moment. It was, for him, a true mountaintop experience.

It is easy to see how that can happen. If you have been up in the mountains and been confronted with a wonderful view, you just want to savour the moment. But such experiences cannot be permanent especially, as in Peter's case, when they are based on a misapprehension.

By suggesting the building of booths for Jesus and Moses and Elijah, Peter was putting the two prophets on a par with Jesus. Peter had forgotten his earlier declaration that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the Living God".

Jesus was the one and only, the unique, Son of God; someone without equal. When the cloud came and Moses and Elijah disappeared, God spoke – "This is my beloved Son, listen to him". With this clarion call, the mountain top experience is over and it was time to go back down the mountain to the nitty gritty of mission in the world.

However, this was an event that Peter and the others would never forget. They did not tell anyone immediately about what had occurred, but it would have been something shared with the early church to reinforce the teaching about Jesus – the crucified, risen and glorified Saviour and Son of God.

The teaching about the transfiguration of Jesus is also an indication of what will become of us at the end of time. As St Paul wrote: “We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”.

We will be changed; metamorphosed; transfigured. Our eternal part, our soul, the God breath within us, will be raised and clothed imperishable and brought into the presence of God. That is our eternal hope. What is eternal in us will be revealed.

In the meantime – what? Paul tells us this in the passage we read from the Book of Romans. He sets out for us our purpose as followers of Jesus in this life: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”.

Hang on a moment, you might say. Didn't you say that being transformed was only an outward show; a disguise?

Yes, I did, but I was talking about a worldly transformation; pretending or trying to be something or someone that one is not. Here, Paul is talking about a transformation that comes from within. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in us. But such renewing only comes when we consciously decide not to conform to the pattern of this world.

As Paul put it elsewhere, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things". Following the ways of the world is described in the Bible as gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. And Paul dealt with this in some detail in chapter 2 of Romans.

Are God's standards eternal? That is a huge question but one which we all need to grasp the nettle of. For me, the answer is yes, God's standards are eternal but that is not the pattern of this world.

The writer of Psalm 119 knew that it takes dedication to keep living in God's ways. He wrote:

"How can [someone] keep his [or her] way pure?

By living according to your word.

I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, wrote Paul. This is not a surface camouflage but an inward transformation. Through God’s Spirit this becomes possible and then, just as Jesus’ face shone on the Mount of Transfiguration, so we can let our light shine. As Jesus instructed – “let your light shine so that men may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”.