

HOW TO DEAL WITH RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Last Sunday after Epiphany, on which was celebrated the Transfiguration, 3 March 2019

The Transfiguration is one of those events that I can understand but not visualise. It shares that status with, for example, Pentecost. My problem is that, although in an intellectual sense, I understand what the text is saying to me, I cannot imagine what it must have been like to be there.

This is not my problem alone. Writing in a collection of papers about art and theology, Rosemary Muir Wright comments on the difficulties faced by artists over the years. She says:

It is easily assumed that religious art in some way illustrates the words of the bible and that to recognise what the painting is 'saying' one need only look up the relevant passage in scripture. The tendency to look at art as if it functioned as the visual equivalent of words is wrong footed. ... The artist is not concerned with the explanation of words, but with the response to the image conjured up by those words.²

Wright's paper is specifically about the Transfiguration. She comments that the artists struggled with the tension in the story between the historical event and the mystical experience that it represented. The artist had to make the depiction somehow real and somehow unreal. The key to any artwork, mosaic or painting was the way in which the light was treated. The transfigured Jesus is not, however, the only figure in the event. The two long dead patriarchs must be shown. The disciples are also important, for they represent, in some ways, the viewer.

Wright concludes her article by saying:

While our knowledge of the bible and the history of the theme's presentation, shape our assumptions about a painting's meaning, the critical element ... is our response to the image itself.³

Each of us, in our own way, is an incipient artist because, when we read the story, we create our own image and respond to that. This is a process that has worried church leaders over the centuries. By careful instruction, leaders can control, often almost completely, the way in which their adherents understand text. Controlling such understandings has always been a major factor in preparing translations of the Bible. The King James Bible had, as one of its purposes, the combatting of the Calvinist translations preferred by the Puritans.

Images are different. Our response to them is quite individual. Although we may share our experiences with others and find many similarities, our own histories will contribute to an experience that is wholly ours. They are not easily controllable by others. This is why both religious art and experience-based religion have long been suspect in many places, including here in Sydney.

¹ Readings: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43a

² Rosemary Muir Wright, "Created and Uncreated Light: The Transfiguration in Western Art", in Steven R Guthrie and Trevor A Hart, *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, Routledge, 2016, p.241

³ Wright, p. 254

Nevertheless, I have some sympathy for their suspicions. Intense religious experiences can be very disconcerting. I have, in some earlier sermons, mentioned my experience in St Paul's Cathedral, London in 1980. I attended, it was in July, I think, a liturgical orchestral mass at which Mozart's *Missa Brevis in D Major* (K194) was performed. I cannot remember at which point in the Mass it was but I was overwhelmed by the sound and the place. It was as though I was caught up in the transcendence of the moment.

It seems so insignificant as I now try to describe what happened to me. Nevertheless, this experience came in the spiritual desert of my departure from the Methodist ministry. It brought me to St James on our return to Sydney. It was life-changing.

You and I can never have an experience of the kind that the three apostles did on that mountain top. Nevertheless, I imagine that each of us can, if we try, recall an experience that took us out of ourselves and redirected us. My St Paul's Cathedral experience was of that kind but I do not imagine that I am alone in having had it. Research shows that many people can report such experiences. In them, people feel taken beyond themselves to a place of a greater reality than the one that they experience in their daily lives. People, such as we, who live within a religious tradition may interpret their experience through its teachings. But such experiences are not limited to those who believe. For those without an interpretative tradition and, I suspect, for many with such a tradition

... the experience comes unexpectedly and often remains secret, not spoken of, for fear of ridicule. Some people simply do not know what to make of what has happened to them. Yet for many, the experience is the most important event in their lives, giving a meaning and direction which is never lost.⁴

As a text, the story of the Transfiguration has a central role in the synoptic gospels that form our three-year lectionary cycle; its role is precisely to give "a meaning and direction which is never lost". It comes directly after Peter's dramatic statement that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus takes the three principal disciples up to the top of Mt Tabor. Each of the Old Testament figures also had mountain top experiences: Moses on Mt Sinai as we heard in the reading from Exodus; Elijah on the occasion of his encountering the Lord in "a sound of sheer silence" or, in older translations, "a still, small voice".⁵ Light is also associated with these events.

The Transfiguration depicts both continuity and discontinuity. Moses and Elijah were the foundation heroes of the tradition in which Jesus stood. They possibly represent, on the one hand, the law and, on the other, the prophets. That they both appeared confirmed the status of Jesus, creating continuity. On the other hand, the immediately preceding events for Moses were of extreme violence. Moses had brought down the first set of stone tablets only to find the people worshipping their golden calf. Three thousand people were killed in retribution for that idolatry. The mountain top experience of Elijah also had extremely violent antecedents. He had challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to see who had the true god. Elijah won and 850 prophets of Baal were slain. Jesus, on the contrary, had not caused anyone to be killed. He had just fed the 5,000 and healed the sick. This was a different leader, creating discontinuity.

The response of the disciples is awkward, to say the least. First, they are very sleepy at one of the high points of the gospel. Perhaps this prefigures the sleeping of the same three in the

⁴ Marianne Rankin, "An introduction to religious experience" <https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/474/1/RERC3-002-1.pdf>

⁵ 1 Kings 19:12

Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prayed before his arrest.⁶ Then Peter, in one of his characteristically heavy-footed actions, proposes to erect three tents in which Moses, Elijah and Jesus could stay. Perhaps he wanted the vision to continue indefinitely. Perhaps he wanted to assert some control over events; perhaps he sought, as we might also, to domesticate the mystical.

In his book on praying with icons, Rowan Williams starts with a 15th century Russian icon of the Transfiguration.⁷ He notes that Orthodox icons of this event are almost all the same. Jesus is in the middle at the top against a dark circular mandala. Moses and Elijah are on each side of him, bowing inwards to acknowledge who he is. The disciples, in contrast, are at the bottom, almost as though they had fallen or been tossed. Peter is on the left, raising his hand to shield his eyes. John is in the middle on his knees, covering his face and looking away. James, on the right, seems to be falling backwards. It is, Williams says, “an icon of quite violent force, explosive quality; it shows an extreme experience”.

Williams comments:

Looking at Jesus seriously changes things; if we do not want to be changed, it is better not to look too hard or too long. The apostles in the icon are shielding their eyes, because what they see is not easily manageable in their existing world. ... Peter, James and John are not ready to see things with and in the light of God any more than we are.⁸

Whatever our experiences might be, and however we might interpret them, we surely know that we cannot live a life where they are permanently present. The context of the account of the Transfiguration itself warns us that, after such an experience, we must return to everyday life. The trick is to carry the experience with us, to begin to “see things with and in the light of God” and not to be deterred by the challenges of our daily life.



⁶ Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46 (Luke does not name the disciples who slept).

⁷ Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2003, pp. 1-19

⁸ Williams, p. 13