

## THE SUNDAY WITH TOO MANY NAMES<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Last Sunday after Epiphany, 23 February 2020, being the celebration of the Feast of the Transfiguration**

Welcome to the Sunday with too many names. In the ordinary course of events, today is the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany. At Epiphany, we recognise that Christ has been revealed to the gentiles, that is, to us. In this season, we concentrate on the early part of the ministry of Jesus. If other things had not intervened, we would today have continued our examination of the Sermon on the Mount.

Next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Thus, today is the Last Sunday in Epiphany. The Seventh Sunday in Epiphany is the last Sunday only when the date of Easter sets Ash Wednesday in the following week. Given that Easter is a moveable feast, we can have up to nine Sundays in Epiphany.

Today is also the Next Sunday before Lent. Isn't that the same as the Last Sunday in Epiphany? Not exactly. Those of us with long memories will remember the names Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima<sup>2</sup>. These are the names that the Book of Common Prayer used for the three Sundays before Lent. The cantata that the choir sang last Sunday afternoon, which was Sexagesima, was specifically written for that day in 1713. Today is Quinquagesima, which is 50 days before Easter. Thomas Cranmer brought these names from the earlier Catholic Sarum rite. They disappeared with the liturgical reforms of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

So far, so good. Am I finished yet? Not quite.

Today, we are celebrating the Transfiguration. In the Book of Common Prayer, this feast is set for 6 August. Although we now regard it as a major feast, in Cranmer's day, it was only a minor one. It has always been of greater significance in the Eastern Church, where it is one of the Twelve Great Feasts. It is regarded as evidence for the Trinity. God the Father is present in the voice. God the Son is present in the person of Jesus and God the Holy Spirit in the enveloping cloud.

This feast was celebrated on various dates in some places in the West, and was fixed on 6 August only in 1457. On 22 July 1456, Christian armies defeated the invading Turks at the Battle of Belgrade. The news of the battle reached Rome on 6 August that year and the next year, Pope Callixtus III set the date of this feast in celebration of the victory, not on the date of the event but on the date on which he heard of it. Apart from the strangeness of this story, we may conclude that this feast has no proper home. The Annunciation is nine months before

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

<sup>2</sup> These names mean 70, 60 and 50 days before Easter. Your quick mathematical minds will have realised immediately, that only seven days separate each of these Sundays, so there is something wrong here. Only Quinquagesima is correct. It is supposed that the two other names arose by analogy with this day, being the nearest round numbers.

<sup>3</sup> Similar issues surround the counting of the 40 days of Lent. Wikipedia says: "In Protestant and Western Orthodox Churches, the season of Lent lasts from Ash Wednesday to the evening of Holy Saturday. This calculation makes Lent last 46 days if the 6 Sundays are included, but only 40 days if they are excluded. This definition is still that of the Anglican Church, Lutheran Church, Methodist Church, and Western Rite Orthodox Church."

Christmas, Easter is set in relation to the Passover, Pentecost is 50 days later but the Transfiguration is not related to anything in particular, so might be celebrated on any day.

Today became the preferred date for Transfiguration only with the Revised Common Lectionary of 1992.<sup>4</sup> As far as I can tell, this placing of the Transfiguration was introduced from the Lutheran practice.

I'm finished with the history now. So, what will we make of the Transfiguration, since this is its day? I want to start with the reference to the Transfiguration in our epistle reading from 2 Peter, the only New Testament mention of the event outside the gospels. This letter was not written by the apostle Peter. This is demonstrated by a reference in Chapter 3 to the death of "our ancestors", by which is meant the first generation of Christians, including Peter himself.<sup>5</sup> The author also refers to the writings of St Paul, implying that they had been collected and circulated, which could not have been before the end of the first century.<sup>6</sup>

This kind of writing, which we would regard with deep suspicion, was common in the ancient world. In this case, the anonymous author seeks to authenticate the work by reference to an event at which Peter was known to have been present. The most important part for us is the opening verse of our reading, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ..."<sup>7</sup> By this remark, the author seeks to ground the Christian faith in real events, not myths, which he regards as falsehoods.

The author was pointing out that Christianity is a profoundly materialist faith. By this I mean that Christianity is firmly grounded in the material world. It originates in the actions of God in the world; creation, incarnation, resurrection and continuing presence.

Such a conclusion might seem to create problems for us when we consider the Transfiguration. It might seem to be a most other-worldly event. I suspect that many of us, including me, have great difficulty in imagining what the Transfiguration was like. The appearance of persons from the past, Moses and Elijah, gives the impression of unreality. It is, in fact, a story that might be part of an animated film, where all sorts of strange things can happen; or part of a Harry Potter movie where digital images can create anything that we can imagine.

The gospels all place this story in exactly the same location, following Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus telling his disciples of his forthcoming suffering. This is perhaps why we celebrate the Transfiguration today, just before Lent, which begins on Wednesday and when we prepare ourselves for Good Friday and Easter. What is clear is that this event is a major critical moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Something real happened here.

If we know what happened before the event, on the way down from the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples who came with him not to tell anyone until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. Jesus is reminding his disciples, and us, that violence is going to continue in the lives of the apostles and in our lives as well.

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<sup>4</sup> The compilers' notes to the lectionary say: "Churches may conclude the period after Epiphany with a reading on the Transfiguration, unless this gospel text is proclaimed on the Second Sunday in Lent." An inspection of the lectionary shows that today's gospel is an alternative to a reading from John 3 on that Sunday.

[https://www.commontexts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RCL\\_Introduction\\_Web.pdf](https://www.commontexts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RCL_Introduction_Web.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> 2 Peter 3:4

<sup>6</sup> 2 Peter 3:15-16

<sup>7</sup> 2 Peter 1:16

Not only is this event frightening in its description of a vision, it contains hints of what is to come. It is little wonder that Peter thought it a good idea to stay on the mountain top. In our Christian lives we are often torn between the high points of religious experience, our so-called mountain top experiences, and the apparent perils of our daily activities. The Transfiguration might seem to encourage this tension. But, if we look more closely, we can see that it undermines it. The contrast is an illusion; the Transfiguration appeared to offer safety but actually offered no safety at all.

On 18 March 1958, Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk now renowned for his spiritual leadership, was doing some errands for his community in the nearby town of Louisville, Kentucky. Trappists are noted for their seclusion and contemplative practices. But Merton, while standing at a street corner, realised that he could not cut himself off from the world. One commentator says that this realisation

... points to Merton's movement from being a kind of enclosed monk in the monastery, turning his back on the world, to beginning to turn toward the world. He was cutting himself off from the world, but gradually he realizes you can't do that. That he's in the monastery for the world.<sup>8</sup>

You see, our lives are all of a piece. There is no safe secluded place in contrast to the dangerous world. There is just one place where we experience both safety and danger at the same time.

This poem by Justin Farley may express what the three disciples thought after the Transfiguration.

### **FOLLOW ME**

You say follow me,  
but I'm not sure where you're going.  
You say follow me,  
as if you're leading me out  
of the chaos and confusion,  
but the closer I follow,  
the thicker the clouds of darkness seem to be  
and the less comfortable my life gets.  
You say follow me,  
but insist I leave "me" behind.  
You say follow me,  
but wait just a minute.  
Let me look you over,  
examine you and ask, "just who are you?"  
You say follow me,  
and my heart knows it's what I was born to do.  
You say follow me,  
but my head has different plans.  
It sees the storm clouds you're brewing  
and the confrontation that arises  
wherever you go.  
My mind makes up excuses,  
finds ways to dismiss you and remain in the lead.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://wfpl.org/exploring-thomas-merton-epiphany-marker-louisville/>

But you say follow me,  
and I see the goodness and living water that flows  
from the river you're providing.  
I see the beauty of your face  
and if what you say is true –  
it's the greatest story the world will ever know.  
But you say follow me  
and it scares me because there's still some doubt.  
But does that doubt have anything to do with you  
or because I know accepting you comes at a cost,  
knowing that I'll have to die to myself  
and admit I'm lost?  
You say follow me.  
Grant that I may be willing to take up my cross.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Justin Farley, "Follow me", <https://alongthebarrenroad.com/2015/01/06/follow-me-christian-poem/>