

Transfiguration and Gay Britannia

The transfiguration is one of the great 'stand-out moments' in the accounts of the public ministry of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. It sits alongside two other great moments, at the baptism and at the crucifixion, when *the identity of Jesus is disclosed*. We might say that Jesus' identity, as one sent from God, is disclosed in almost everything he does – the teachings, the miracles, the healings, the integrity and authority of his actions and relationships. Yet in the formal structure of the gospel narratives, 'who Jesus is' is only made plain specifically, (one might say objectively), when *the voice of God speaks*, which happens on these three occasions only. Thus, when today, in Luke's version of the transfiguration, the voice declares, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" this is a moment of divine disclosure that is qualitatively different from what has gone before or comes after in the ongoing narrative. Similarly, at the baptism we read (in Matthew, Mark and Luke) that, "a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Likewise at the crucifixion, two associated things happen. The curtain of the temple is torn in two, thus momentarily breaking down the separation of humans from God, signifying a revelation from God. Owing however to the absence of God in the dereliction of the cross, the divine disclosure is put into the mouth of a human witness, the centurion, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

There are, then, three great moments in the synoptic gospels of insight into 'who Jesus is'. And they remind the reader, the hearer and faithful followers, that this Jesus is somehow more than just another prophet, messiah or miracle worker. He is God's witness, God's representative. In fact he shares in the divine being.

One of the features of the transfiguration is that it is witnessed by three disciples. They all three hear the voice from within the cloud. This is a

public moment. By contrast, at the baptism it is only Jesus who hears the voice of God, and no-one else. Similarly, at the crucifixion when the centurion makes the declaration of Jesus' identity no-one else is within earshot! In both contexts, therefore, the message remains a secret! No-one is any the wiser. So when at the transfiguration three disciples hear the voice, and are terrified and react as they do wanting to build booths, we should surely expect that the message will get out. But it doesn't, because the text tells us, "they kept silent, and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." And this feature is found also In Matthew and Mark's gospels. There Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone anything, until after the resurrection. This picks up the theme of secrecy, found most prominently in Mark's gospel, which urges a profound caution over jumping to too hasty conclusions about who Jesus is, and what he stands for, and how he is to be understood and received, and indeed followed. Even though there has been a mighty revelation on the mountainside, still the advice is to let the seed grow slowly and quietly, even in secret, we know not how!!... the suggestion being that all these things about Jesus and his mission will become clear in due course.... or rather, that they will become clear, says the narrative and says Jesus, after the resurrection! What we learn, therefore, is that these three great moments of revelation, at the baptism, at the transfiguration and at the crucifixion are not quite self-contained, even though they stand on their own, because, actually, *they all come into their own only when Jesus is raised from the dead!*... when the truth about him as God's eternal exponent of grace and truth becomes apparent for all to see – or for all with eyes to see and ears to hear! – because God has raised him!.... It is in a wonderful way that the gospel stories slowly but surely reveal truths about Jesus.

On the mountain top, in this encounter of shining brightness and glory and fear, in the presence of two ancient witnesses and three human

witnesses, as Jesus is transfigured, he is seen differently, with startling clarity and transparency. This creates the potential for him to be known differently, grasped, received, honoured, adored, appropriated, followed. On the journey of faith, this is something that can happen. Suddenly, and sometimes even with startling clarity, we can see something more of the truth, grasp a new meaning, appreciate afresh an old familiar hymn or saying or theme. And so we move gently into a deeper relationship with Christ without necessarily having sought it, but richly blessed in having found ourselves carried forward – more assured, less anxious, more rooted. This is how the journey of faith sometimes unfolds, indeed the journey of life.... I think this is how some of us felt – I know I did – as we took part in the dialogues of the recent Summer Series, on the last three Sunday evenings in July, as we listened to three accounts of faith in the context of daily life from three of our members. They were occasions of insight and blessing.

As I think of this transfiguration theme of seeing more clearly and of more of the truth becoming apparent, I am struck by the impact in the media over the past ten days of material marking the 50th anniversary of the decriminalisation of sex between men – the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967. Television, radio and the press have signposted multiple programmes, plays and articles highlighting the stories of individuals, many both harrowing and heroic and charting the progress of the fight for gay rights and the removal of ancient, arcane and brutal legislation. Since I was aged seven in 1967, I am very conscious that this has been one of the great issues of my lifetime, not least of course in the context of the Church of England. A letter in the Guardian back in May, by the campaigner Peter Tatchell, made it very plain, however, that 1967 was in fact only the beginning of a long and tortuous process to achieve the elimination of anti-gay legislation, which in the UK was only complete, believe it or not, in 2013 when legislation in Scotland transacted in 2009 came into effect. He observed that what decriminalisation actually meant

on the ground, was that “homophobic laws were not enforced in some circumstances”, and he noted that “many aspects of gay male life remained criminal. In fact, the repression grew much worse.” He cites from his own detailed research of Home Office records that convictions of gay men for gross indecency in the years following decriminalisation rose by 300% and this surge in a cynical and harsh street response lasted well into the 1970s. In the late 1980s, following the Margaret Thatcher family values campaign, there was also a sharp rise in arrests for *consenting* behaviour, with rates of conviction rising to levels equivalent to the 1950s, long before decriminalisation. It was only with the Sexual Offences Act of 2003 that England and Wales finally achieved a legislature that did not any longer discriminate against gay sexuality. It is entirely true that we have come a long way since 1967, and the 50th anniversary has been an opportunity to celebrate this. On the other hand it should not be overlooked that gay people have suffered profound injustice, social ostracism and street harassment over an extended period at the same time that liberalisation has continued bit by bit to take effect.

In amongst this conflicted, proud but painful history, there have been the lives of ordinary gay people, people like me, people known to me. And in an episode of the BBC Gay Britannia series, ‘Prejudice and Pride: The Peoples History of LGBTQ Britain’, I was very struck by the story of a female naval officer. In 1993, having served several years at sea and been commended for promotion, probably in her early 30s, somebody disclosed to her superiors that she was gay. This resulted in her immediate dismissal from the navy. She hadn’t had a relationship with anyone, certainly not at sea. There was no action she had taken or gesture she was alleged to have made that could have been construed as public or of a suggestive nature. It was simply her sexuality that had come to light and was now causing her to be debarred from service, shamed and dishonoured. When at this point she had to come out to her parents, thankfully she was greeted only with understanding, love and concern, for

which she remains profoundly grateful. What strikes me most about her story, however, is that at the heart of this matter, crowded around as it has often been by issues of discrimination, legislation, obsession with sexual acts and irrational fears about deviance, is the human heart. This naval officer was simply gay, born to love in a certain way; as we would say from a faith perspective, made this way in the image of God. Her story draws us, I think, to meditate on the nature of diverse humanity and on the power and beauty of each person's journey towards identity and self-worth. As we look back on 50 years of struggle, action and change I think it is not inappropriate to talk of a process of transfiguration, through which many of us who are both gay and straight have come to know and see the world very differently, mostly for the better. I think this is a matter in relation to which the Holy Spirit has led us into more of the truth. And if it's accurate to speak of transfiguration in connection with an evolving social and communal phenomenon, it may also be true for each of us that there have been particular mountain top moments of disclosure through which our personal understanding and empathy has been advanced. I would say that hearing the story of this young naval officer was one such moment for me; a moment of being reminded that the truth about people in their humanity before God should always be uppermost in our attention, especially when there can often be noisy alternative narratives surrounding all of us.

What is very striking, of course, if we care to notice it, is that this conflicted history of gay issues over the last 50 years, with legislation potentially indicating one thing and real life often being another, and with the appearance of toleration yet the reality of continuing suppression; this situation is mirrored in our church. The particular issues we face in the CofE are worthy of their own scrutiny and I will save this for another time. Suffice to say that as a CofE we are entering a new and challenging phase of handling differences of opinion on this matter. A lot of effort is being made to keep us together, with mediated conversations going on at

synods and behind closed doors. But there are also those who are determined to drive people into opposing silos and we have to find ways of finding a faithful way forward. In this present climate of the 50th anniversary, however, I hope very much that we will take the opportunity to salute the pioneers and heroes of gay liberation, who may at times have upset some of us, but without whom we simply would not be where we are today.

1915 Words
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