

Sermon 6 March 2011

Transfiguration

Sue Monk Kidd writes:

I tried to pray, ‘Please God ... please’. I muttered the words, trusting that God would distil the meaning from them and break through my terrible impulse. A gust rippled through the tree limbs and sang a song of absence. It was too much for me, I got up and walked away.

I burrowed into the wind, my head down. I happened to look up again as I passed beneath the branches of a dogwood tree, and my eyes fell upon a curious little appendage suspended from a twig just over my head. I kept walking. No, stop ... look closer. Not knowing what else to do but obey the impulse, I backed up and looked again. I took one step toward it, then two, until I was so close that the fog of my breath encircled it. I had come upon a cocoon. I was caught suddenly by a sweep of reverence, by a sensation that made me want to sink to my knees. For somehow I knew that I had stumbled on an epiphany, a strange gracing of my darkness. I took my forefinger and touched the bottom tip of the tiny brown chrysalis and felt something like light move in me. In that moment God seemed to speak to me about transformation. About the descent and emergence of the soul. About hope.’ (*When the Heart Waits, Sue Monk Kidd p.12*)

She continues:

I broke the twig from the limb and carried the chrysalis home. For this was my cocoon. My darkness. My soul incubating within. Back home I carefully taped the twig with the cocoon to the branch of a crab-apple tree in my back yard. Then I went inside.

The children were engrossed in their homework and Sandy (my husband) was setting the table. I stood at the window watching the cocoon which hung in the winter air like an upside-down question mark. Live the question, God whispered. That was the moment the knowledge descended into my heart and I understood. Really understood. Crisis, change, all the myriad upheavals that blister the spirit and leave us groping — they aren’t voices simply of pain but also of creativity. And if we would only listen, we might hear such times beckoning us to a season of waiting, to the place of fertile emptiness.

I turned from the window, quickened by the moment. I knew. Dear God, I knew. I must enter the chrysalis. (*When the Heart Waits, Sue Monk Kidd p.13*)

Sue Monk Kidd describes a moment of clarity — of the fog lifting, of really understanding — a moment of transfiguration.

Was this something of Jesus experience?

The following is from a sermon by Michael Sadgrove, Durham Cathedral, Matthew 17: 1–9, 3 February 2008:

This homily was delivered when he was engaged in parish ministry in Ireland before joining the faculty of [Mount St. Mary’s Seminary](#), Emmitsburg, Maryland.

The Transfiguration story is pivotal in St Matthew's Gospel. It's a point of climax when Jesus is revealed for who he is, the one St Matthew wants his readers to know and follow. For a moment, the mists dissolve, and the secret is laid bare: he is disclosed as the anointed one who has come in fulfilment of all that the law and the prophets longed for. In his flesh and blood we see nothing less than Israel's God who had once disclosed himself in another transfiguration at a burning bush and spoken his sacred name. All that has taken place so far has been leading to this apex, this crown of the parabola. From now on, the narrative darkens as it descends towards the passion — but we know what we didn't know before, which is that the man destined to die is none other than the Son of God.

We mustn't forget where this story comes in the Gospel. It follows on the heels of the great recognition scene at Caesarea Philippi where Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Caesarea is Banias, the source of the River Jordan where it emerges from a great cliff, and the source, for Matthew, both of Christianity and of the church. For what is Christianity but to make the confession that Jesus is the Son of God? Matthew is saying to us that those words change everything. They transfigure all of life. And this is to remind us of where the gospel began: with Jesus' baptism in this same river, where he first announced that the kingdom of God is at hand. In other words, it is baptism that is the transforming, transfiguring force in our lives. And one of the consequences of recognising and confessing Jesus in baptism is that our vision of the world is cleansed, purified. We see in new ways. And what we see is God's presence at the heart of all existence and at the heart of all human life: Christ playing in ten thousand human faces, a world charged with the grandeur of God as the poet put it.

On the holy island of Lindisfarne they talk of 'thin places' where the world is more transparent to the presence of God. This is how Matthew wants us to read his transfiguration story: as inviting us to see creation as 'thin', sacramental, alive with the divine, a vision of beauty and grace open to us all.

If you ask me what religion is, I say that it is a new way of seeing, a way of being aware that makes the ordinary extraordinary and the commonplace nothing less than a miracle. To see and live and pray like this is transfiguration.

The story holds a second aspect we mustn't miss. The transfiguration of Jesus is framed in St Matthew by two predictions of how he must suffer and die. The Christ whom Peter has recognised will not go up to glory before he suffers pain; or to put it another way, the glory of the transfiguration will turn out to be the glory of his self emptying for us in his death on the cross. The marvellous paradox of Matthew's passion account is that he sees in the darkness of Good Friday something hidden from those who crucified Jesus. He puts it into the mouth of the Roman centurion, that good man whose confession of faith at Golgotha mirrors Peter's at Caesarea: 'Surely this man was God's Son!' *Transfigured Night* we might call it. And this too speaks not only of what happened *then* and in *that* place, but what can happen *now* for all of us. The crucifixion has many layers of meaning; but one of them is that God knows the pain of the world. 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' Bonhoeffer said that in our distress, 'only the suffering God can help'. Matthew's point is, God knows and cares, because he has walked that way himself.

And again, if you ask me what religion is, I say that it is a new way of interpreting suffering, entering into the world's pain as God himself does. To see and live and pray like this is transfiguration.

There is one more connection we need to make from the story of transfiguration. The revelation of Jesus' glory on the mountain, the bewildered disciples, the sense of being awestruck by some great mystery remind us strongly of another New Testament story. I am thinking of the appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples at the end of St Matthew's Gospel. It's tempting to wonder whether the transfiguration preserves a memory of an Easter encounter which Matthew for reasons to do with the way he wished to shape his story, has placed right at the centre of his gospel. And this perhaps helps us to see why it is embraced by those predictions of what lies ahead for the Son of Man: not only that he must suffer and die, but that he must be raised on the third day. To hear this story again is to be pointed towards resurrection hope, the hope into which we were baptised, the hope which sustains us all our days, whether we live or die. Resurrection is the goal of the journey we begin next week, on Ash Wednesday.

And if one last time you ask me what religion is, I say that it is to hope against hope, to live Easter, to banish despair by lighting fires in cold dark rooms and tell of love's work being done in the world. To see and live and pray like this is transfiguration. I can't pretend it is easy. Like Peter, I blunder about in the presence of glory: I miss the point by trying to capture it instead of paying attention to what God is doing. The voice from the cloud tells us what we must do. 'This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!' If we can discern his voice amid the clamour and chatter that bid for our attention; if we will listen and obey and follow, then we can know transfiguration, glimpse glory in our ordinary days. It's no good going in quest for it as if it were the holy grail or the golden fleece: it must find us. But it will, for his pledge to us is: 'where I am, there you will be also'.

And maybe, just maybe, this eucharist, this baptism of Cooper and Brodie could be that mountain top, that burning bush, that place where we see the glory of the crucified and risen Lord, and know and love him once again.