

Transfiguration 2013

Last year I told you a story that I would like to tell again, because I think it's a great story. A friend of mine actually saw this happen at the Trappist St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass. One day, a high-ranking ecclesiastical official was visiting the monastery. As usually happens on occasions like that, there was a flurry of activity around the man as he entered the monastery. As this "prince of the Church" was being welcomed and shown around the monastery buildings, a little, withered, ancient monk came up to him, stood right in front of him, and asked "who are you?". The official was a little non-plussed at such a direct question and at the same time a little annoyed at not being recognized for who and what he was. But thinking that the old monk had entered his dotage and was undoubtedly suffering a little from dementia or alzheimers, the cardinal began to explain in a rather slow, patronizing way his position in the Church and in the ecclesiastical structure. The old monk stopped him unceremoniously, tapped him gently on his red cassocked chest and said, "I know all of that. My question is '*who are you? Who are you?*'"

That "prince of the Church" didn't quite know what to say or how to respond, because the question that old monk had asked him was the question of a life-time, the question which determines everything else, the question that brings us to the threshold of Mystery right in front of us, or maybe more accurately, right under our skins: "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" is also the question that keeps on coming up throughout the scriptures, and it is asked of both God and of us. In the gospels in particular it is the question

repeated asked of Jesus. Who is this One who drives out demons, who transgresses the Law, who heals people, who raises the paralyzed, who claims to be able to forgive sins, who is transfigured in front of his disciples and is declared by a voice from heaven to be a “beloved son”. Who is this One? At one point in his pilgrimage with the disciples, Jesus turns the question back to them and asks, “who do people say that I am?” and then, after they have given the expected answers, he pushes them and prods more deeply, “but who do *you* say that I am?”

Identity is an on-going and overarching question in the scriptures, and the question seems to go in two directions. It is question about both God and us. On the pilgrimage of life, at some point, most human beings will stand befuddled, not knowing either who they are or who it is behind the events of life who seems to be calling, beckoning, to us. All real religion and faith and spiritual awareness seems to begin with this kind of puzzlement about ourselves. God alone, *Gaudium et spes* from the Second Vatican Council, argues, can supply us with the complete answer to that question. It is only in the Mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of who you and I are becomes clear. Jesus reveals not only the God who is hidden in inexhaustible Otherness, but he also discloses, breaks open, us to ourselves.

Throughout his work, Jesus, through the signs he performed and the stories he was telling, was trying to get people to see what God was up to, what God was doing in and through him. When he raised the paralytic and pronounced the forgiveness of his sins, people were amazed, were astonished, but usually they were only able to see things on the surface—a wonder! A sign! Nifty things, great things, but what did it all mean? Often

it was Jesus' enemies who, ironically, were asking the real question: Who is this guy? Who does this rabbi think he is? So when Jesus took Peter and John and James up the mountain and was transfigured, he was trying to open their eyes, he was trying to get them to see beneath the surface of things, trying to get them to gasp with wonder so that they would be able ever thereafter to see everything differently and to be able to answer that question about who he was and who they were.

In a sense, the transfiguration of Jesus was precisely that moment on his three-year journey with his disciples when an answer was given to the question, "Who does this rabbi think he is, going around changing things, challenging the received scribal interpretation, performing healings and other signs, breaking the Law, forgiving sins?" On the mountain of the transfiguration, Jesus was caught up and bathed in the love, the power and the glory of the Kingdom, so that his entire being was transformed with light, much like the way that music transforms words. The transfiguration was an answer to the question: "Who are you?"- the question that everybody, both his friends and his enemies, was asking about him in one way or another. And in the midst of that experience when the veil of ordinariness was pulled back on the mountain of transfiguration, the disciples see embodied in Jesus' very flesh his' words in John's gospel, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

To say that Jesus is "light", and not only light, but the light of the world, is making an immense claim for this rabbi. Light is what we need to live. In fact, light is what is necessary for there to be life at all. We sense this, I think, early in the morning when

things are cold and dark we suddenly see and feel the first rays of the sun. It's as if life is once again being given to us. That experience is, I believe, a primordial experience written into our cells, into our DNA. One of the most awe-evoking moments in Earth's evolution came three billion years ago, according to current scientific estimates, when a simple primitive cell mutated and began to capture light from the sun in a process we call photosynthesis and to convert it to food and oxygen. The Sun was constantly radiating its light toward Earth; throughout the entire history of our planet, Earth was bathed in sunlight, but until life evolved to this new place of being able to capture the light to use it, our planet was not capable of being nourished by the light that shining on it.

The Christian journey, no, the human journey, is really about that- it's about whether and how we are ready and able to receive the light shining from God. One of the beautiful things about Franciscan theology in particular is its sense that the world is sacramental and that the light of God shines through the entire creation, and that in Jesus, in his very createdness, we see the crystallization, the focus, the pouring forth of that light that was at the very foundation of things and which is still present in and to all things. Our journey through life is about whether and how we are ready and able to allow the light of Christ to illumine, to light up, everything in our lives. This image of light is at the heart of what the gospel is and what the gift given to us in Jesus is. St. Paul put it magnificently in his second letter to the Corinthians when he wrote, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (4:6)

This is the goal of the human journey- to see the glory of God, which we sense every time we feel the warmth and light of our physical sun, and which we celebrate at every Liturgy. And this glory we see shining in the face of Jesus. Our task and the challenge given to us is to so allow Jesus' words and life to enter into our own consciousness that *who he is* begins, as the 2nd Vatican Council taught, to open up for us *who we are!*

Our destiny, according to the vision of the book of Revelation, is not, as we so often think, a kind of solitary communion with God. Rather it is a life in a city, in society with other people, modeled on that of Jesus. The great vision at the end of Revelation is that of the New Jerusalem, the city of God, to which all the nations will come and whose doors will remain open forever. And here, God, far from being the chief or even the only one we live with in heaven, is not an individual we shall relate to at all. God, rather is the light in which we shall live together, the light that will illumine all our dealings with each other:

“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.” (Rev. 21: 22-25)