

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sunday, August 6, 2017
The Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ
Luke 9:28-36, 2 Peter 1:13-21, Exodus 34:29-35
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I met George Robertson, now Baron Robertson of Port Ellen, shortly after he was, very unexpectedly, made the British Secretary of State for Defence in 1997. I was an Army Chaplain on a Northern Ireland tour in a particularly strife-riven part of the province called South Armagh where the only safe travel around the area was by helicopter. He visited us only days after his appointment, and he impressed us by having a very disarming, down-to-earth manner.

First, he confessed that he had never been in a helicopter before that day. Then he went on to tell us the story of his appointment. The Prime Minister, he told us, had phoned him and told him completely out-of-the-blue that he was to be Secretary of State for Defence. He said he could not have been more surprised, and continued: "After I put the phone down I thought, 'Well I'd better get down to "Main Building" [which is where the Ministry of Defence is]. I got a cab and went up to the front door where I was stopped by a severe looking doorman. "Can I help you, sir?" he said. Yes, I'm looking for the Secretary of State for Defence's Office. "And why would you be wanting to know that, sir?" came the doubtful reply. Well, I am the Secretary of State for Defense!" We thought he was great, and the fact he was willing to tell these stories against himself inspired trust immediately.

Identity is a huge part of life, isn't it? We are always trying to work out who we are and who other people are. Are they trustworthy or not? Should we follow them or avoid them? Are they friend or foe? And what of we ourselves? How much of a life does it take for us to find an answer that question?

Literature, popular and classical, revolves around identity in so many ways. It is the source of much dramatic tension. Will Batman be unmasked as Bruce Wayne, or Superman as Clark Kent?

And there is often real moral power in such tensions. We might think of Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. He first appears to us, and to Elizabeth Bennet the heroine of the piece, as the rich, proud, aloof, and snobbish aristocrat; someone whose judgment of people appears to be driven only by their social position relative to his own. In time, however, it becomes clear that his lack of social grace hides a man of real moral character, kindness, and compassion. He is, through a traumatic, scandalous event involving Elizabeth's sister, transfigured in her eyes and ours. And, of course, being Jane Austen, love and marriage quickly ensue. There are a million such examples, and that is because identity is close to each of our hearts; close to the heart of every human life. It is also squarely at the heart of the New Testament and the Christian faith.

The central question of the New Testament is the identity of Jesus. Who is he? And in today's Gospel, at the Transfiguration, we see him revealed as who he really is. The reading comes at the end of a section that is, in a very real sense, the absolute pivot or hinge of the whole Gospel narrative, the fulcrum upon which all faith comes to rest. And just a few verses before this Jesus asks his disciples that double question: "Who do men say that I am? And they answering said, John the Baptist; but others [say], Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets is risen

again. And he said unto them, But who do you say that I am?" And that is what this remarkable revelation is really about: The answer to that question. Who is he to us, in our eyes, in our minds, and in our lives?

The Transfiguration, like the Baptism, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection are crucial events in Christ's life, but they also describe a constant theme in our lives and our life of faith. We recognize them as the pattern and experience of our own lives. We know the harsh contours of the cross and the wonder of the life that rises from the ashes of our brokenness and mistakes. Today we also realize that we know our share of transfigurations.

First, there is how we see others change before our eyes. The nice girl we meet becomes the amazing person we come to know and, ultimately, is revealed as the love of our lives. Or the quiet man who lives next door turns out to be the world expert on one thing or another. (Not that uncommon in Georgetown, I begin to realize!) Or the gruff and rather socially inept individual, we are suddenly made aware, like Elizabeth Bennet's Mr. Darcy, has done some real act of kindness and courage we would never have thought him capable of doing (hence the other half of the title, "Prejudice.") People are transfigured before our eyes every day.

Secondly, there is how we appear to ourselves. We each see our self as a miserable sinner until we finally hear what the church has been telling us all our lives and we realize, to our amazement, that in fact we really are a beloved child of God. Moreover, we find that, despite everything, we have been appointed, not to be Secretary of State for Defense, but to a much loftier position, to be an ambassador of God's Kingdom and Christ's agent in the world.

And all this transfigured life rests on that one question of identity. Many begin by seeing Christ as a good man who had some nice words to say. Only later, through the Church's teaching, through service, through the joyful and shattering events of our lives, do we suddenly find ourselves on that mountain where the good man and the nice words fade. In their place we see the dazzling robes and hear the voice of God, "This is my son, my chosen, listen to him."

This happens in people's lives when it happens. There is no predicting it. C. S. Lewis, who was as rational and rigorous an intellectual atheist as any of his age, describes it happening to him thus:

"You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen [College], night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." (*Surprised by Joy*, ch. 14, p. 266)

For those of us who have perhaps been to that mountain top already in our lives, the problem is different. The problem is that, while we never forget, the experience fades and we perhaps come to question its reality. Those of us who have spent more time in helicopters than we would like to have spent will struggle to remember the full wonder that George Robertson felt on his first flight, hopping at low level over the hedgerows of South Armagh, but its after glow still lingers. Most of us never have an experience that is anything like as dramatic as the one James and Peter and John were part of on that mountain. As in most things, there are degrees

of intensity of experience, and yet there are no degrees of truth. If we experience God, it is either God we experience or it is not.

You and I have our own experiences of the Transfiguration of Christ, of the realization of who he is. Maybe it was on a mountain, but maybe it was in a small dark bedroom, or just sitting on a bench in the park, or in the quiet of an empty church. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that we know who he is and, as the voice of God said on the mountain, that we listen to him. So we should rejoice today in the truth revealed on the mountain top. We should go out from here to look again for that same transfiguration in our understanding of who he really is. Then we may also more fully recognize the truth in the people around us (have we, like Elizabeth Bennet, got some people very wrong?) and, indeed, the truth about ourselves. For the doorman of the kingdom has every right to ask who we are, and we should have a truthful and accurate answer to give him.