

Changes

Text: St. Mark 9:2-9

About five years ago I saw a fascinating play in New York titled “Metamorphoses.” It was based on the poem of the same name by the Roman poet, Ovid. Both the poem and the play are simply a series of ancient Greek and Roman myths, told one after the other. But they are very particular sorts of myths, each one involving some sort of human change. Indeed, the very name “metamorphoses” simply means “changes.” By the time the evening was over, one came away with a profound sense of all the metamorphoses, all the changes, that take place in human life.

The various myths of change that were played out included the story of Narcissus, the beautiful youth who, when he saw his reflection in the water, was so enraptured by it that he could not tear himself away, remaining rooted to the spot until he withered and died and was changed into the flower we call a narcissus. The play also included the beautiful story of Alcyon, a young woman deeply in love with her husband, who, despite her pleas not to do so, went to sea and then perished in a storm. So great was her grief and so great was the pity of the gods for her that she and her husband were changed into seabirds who live their whole lives at sea, but also always together. Those days surrounding the winter solstice when the halcyon, or kingfisher as we call it, breeds, have forever since been called the halcyon days, days of calm, warm, peaceful weather in the middle of winter. The evening also included the famous story of Orpheus and his young bride Eurydice who died on their wedding day. In his grief, Orpheus, the greatest singer of the ancient world, went to Hades himself to charm the gods of the underworld in order that he might bring Eurydice back to the living, to change her from death to life. But he ultimately lost her when he could not resist the impulse to look at her before they entered back into the light of the living; or, perhaps, the play subtly suggested, it was because she had changed and had come

to love her new home.

Many of these stories, such as the stories of Narcissus and Alcyon, seem to be whimsical “just so” stories that tell us about the origins of certain kinds of animals, trees and flowers. But in putting them all together, Ovid meant his reader to see something much more profound than that, for he meant to show something about human beings and their desires. He meant to show something about how the soul changes; he meant to show how what we love and desire changes us, and how what we love and desire is ultimately what we become.

In these respects, the most important story is the last one Ovid tells, the story of Eros and Psyche. To understand its full import, it is helpful to know that Eros is the god of love, that Eros means “love,” and that Psyche means soul. This is a story then about love and the soul. Now, in this story Eros secretly comes to Psyche in the dark of night, and she falls deeply in love with him. However, he does not tell her who he is, nor does he ever let her see him. She is at first satisfied to honor his request. But then she unwisely confides her secret to her sisters who jealously introduce her to the suspicion that her nightly visitor is, in fact, a monster, and that is why he will not let her look at him. Unable any longer to bear the temptation to spy upon him and find out who he is, therefore, one night when Eros is asleep, Psyche lights a candle and looks at him – and he is the most beautiful youth she has ever seen. But as she watches him sleep hot wax from her candle falls on his shoulder and burns him; he wakes up and reproaches her for her suspicions and then flees, for love, of course, flees from distrust. The rest of the story is her long and arduous search for Eros, and the many trials that she must endure before she is reunited to him. The point of that, and of this most important of all changes, is that love is ours and that it fulfills us when we desire it above all things, are not suspicious of it, and are able to endure all things for its sake. When we have changed from suspicion to one who loves above all, we are

changed in the most important way human beings can be.

The poet T.K. Harvey sums up the point of the story well when he writes:

She heard far echoes of the voice of Love,
And found his footsteps' traces everywhere.
But nevermore they met! since doubts and fears,
Those phantom shapes that haunt and blight the earth,
Had come 'twixt her, a child of sin and tears,
And that bright spirit of immortal birth;
Until her pining soul and weeping eyes
Had learned to seek him only in the skies;
Till wings unto the weary heart were given,
And she became Love's angel bride in heaven.

Now, all these stories that Ovid recounts from the treasure store of Greek and Roman mythology are exactly that, myths. But in saying that, we should realize that myths are rarely fantasies. Often in their very fanciful forms they hold great truths about the world and our relations to it; often they hold great general and timeless truths about God and the soul, and even sometimes, as one philosopher suggested, they even contain intimations of Christianity. In that vein, I want to suggest that perhaps all the metamorphoses that the ancients saw in human life may actually help us understand something about the mysterious Transfiguration of Jesus in front of the disciples, for the Transfiguration is about love and change. It is perhaps helpful to note that the word "transfiguration" is simply the Latin translation of the Greek "metamorphosis."

To be sure there are things that no myth can ever help us to understand about Jesus' Transfiguration for it is no timeless, general myth that could have happened anywhere, at any

time. It is a very specific story about Jesus and, indeed, about his historical uniqueness. To be sure, because Jesus is unique this story has to be told in order to tell us who he is so that we do not confuse him with any other. It is meant to identify him without question to the disciples. It comes soon after the story of how, when he asked the disciples who they thought he was, Peter boldly replied, for the first time in history, that he is the Messiah, the anointed one, the one that God had promised from the beginning of the world. The astounding sight of Jesus'

Transfiguration is surely meant to underline and emphasize the point that Jesus is the Messiah, for after the Transfiguration there can be, for those who witnessed it, no mistaking Jesus for a mere but powerful wonder worker and healer; there is no mistaking him for a mere teacher of wisdom and morals. With Moses and Elijah standing by his side, we see that both the Law and prophets witness to him and support him, underscoring that he is the fulfillment of everything they have ever pointed to. God himself witnesses to him, as God did at his baptism, by saying from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" No myth can ever help us in understanding that Christ is the unique and authoritative revelation of God himself. And because no myth can help us with that, because no truth of general reason can teach us that, such a heavenly display of authoritative witnesses is necessary.

But where, perhaps, all the metamorphoses of the human soul that the pagans saw do help is in teaching us something about our continuing relation to the Transfiguration. It helps us understand something of how Jesus' Transfiguration, his change from a figure of mortality to a figure in which God's light fully dwells and from whom it radiates, is tied to our transfiguration, to our deepest and most important changes.

Now, at first it is not exactly clear what, if any, continuing relation there is or should be between us and the Transfiguration other than taking it as an authoritative and very impressive

witness to Jesus and his mission. Peter, always so quick with the words, was terrified at the sight, and for once didn't know what to say. The best he could manage was to suggest that they build three booths for Moses, Elijah, and the transfigured Jesus. It is an understandable enough reaction. When confronted with awesome and holy things, we are terrified and dumbstruck. The first thing we want to do when we recover our sense is to enshrine them. Throughout the whole world there are shrines and temples built on places where some great holy event, some vision of awe and majesty has taken place. In fact, long after Peter's original proposal, a church was built on the site best reckoned to be the mountain where the Transfiguration took place. When the holy is manifest among us, we do want to return to it time and time again; we want to hold it in time, place, and memory. It would be shallow and perhaps even blasphemous not to do so. It is beautiful and ought to be contemplated.

But sometimes enshrining the holy, building a booth for the law and the prophets and the Messiah is an unfortunate attempt to, as we say, "put them in a box," an attempt to control them and control their power. Then we can visit them and we can admire them, and we can retell the stories about them. But they are at a safe distance and this way they don't get out to frighten us again, and they certainly don't change or transfigure human life. They and God's glory stays safely tucked away. That is what a lot of churches are-- shrines for the holy to keep it at a safe distance.

That is to lose something very important, for while Jesus' transfiguration is meant to tell us something about Jesus and his mission, while it is meant to convince us of who he is, it is also meant to show what and who *we* are to become. It is meant to show us our future transfiguration. It is meant to give us a vision of perfect humanity that has been changed by God, and of souls in whom God's light now brilliantly shines. As many ancient Christian writers argued, the

Transfiguration of Jesus, the light of the world, is a symbol of the transformation of the world and a symbol of the world to come. If it is indeed what we are to become then we dare not hold it fixed and enshrined in any other place than our own souls. Fixed there, it is meant to transform us.

A moment ago, I said that the Transfiguration is meant to show and convince the disciples who Jesus is. But think for a moment *why* it convinces them. To be sure, it is astounding and unusual. But that isn't entirely the reason why it is convincing. The Transfiguration is convincing because it is beautiful, and the beautiful convinces us. One philosopher once noted that the Gospels are so beautiful that they must be true. The same person also said that when looking at Jesus she quite automatically thought of God. It is in this way that the Transfiguration is convincing because in it one sees the beauty of Christ's life and sees the beauty of God's plan, a plan in which Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets suddenly come together and find their fulfillment in him. In his beauty they make sense, and they shine even more brightly.

Now, the thing about real beauty is that we should admire it. But what we admire and find beautiful also changes us. It gives us a new sense of purpose and goodness; what we admire we cannot help but aspire to. That certainly has been the case with any number of those who have followed Christ in the past; seeing the beauty of his life, they sought to make their lives like his. It was certainly the case with people like St. Francis of Assisi or with a Mother Teresa. And, of course, in turn as we look at the beauty of their lives, we cannot help but be inspired and changed, too. So to see this light and to admire it is actually to see things in a new light, to see our own lives in a new light, to see what we can become. That is already the first important step in being changed into creatures of light ourselves. To fall in love with this sort of beauty and to

be willing to do anything for that beauty is to fall truly in love.

As in the myth of Psyche and Eros, love flees when the soul handles it roughly and distrusts it. It fled in Adam's and Eve's presumption that they knew good and evil better than God and could decide on it all by themselves. It flees in sharp words and violence; it flees in hatred, prejudice and lack of attention. But perhaps fleeing is not the right word, for God's love does not run away; we either chase it away or we turn our backs on it by changing and betraying our love for real love. It only comes back when we quit chasing it and when we wait for it quietly with all of our heart and soul and mind; it only comes back when we change and are willing to suffer anything for it. That is also why we can't just enshrine the holy and keep it in a booth. We have to enshrine it in our hearts and let it change us, reform us and lead us. We have to look at the light but we also have to become it. That is what Jesus meant, I think, when he told his disciples "you are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." We have to love light and love, and we have to give light and love if we are to become light and love, for we do become that which we love most.

The Transfiguration witnesses to the fact that Christ is the Messiah. But who the Messiah is, is the one who has come to change us and to lead us to the light. He does not only show us light, he gives us light to become light. Therefore go out from here and "let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."