

Transfiguration or Metamorphosis

Right in the middle of Mark's Gospel (chapter 9) we are confronted with his transfiguration account – where Jesus upon a mountain top becomes resplendent and converses with Moses and Elijah, the pillars of our Hebrew tradition - and where a divine voice supportive of Jesus shakes up Peter, James and John. Up until now we have been moving through a thoroughly earthbound narration with Jesus healing sick people or telling parables or feeding crowds within an increasingly hostile environment. And now comes this bedazzling interruption of his story?

No doubt the early Christian community – amid the everyday and even tragic story of Jesus – wanted to emphasize that Jesus was more than an everyday celebrity. It wanted to show how Jesus, for all his condemnation by the authorities of his day, was the true heir to God's biblical interventions in this world – via people like Moses and Elijah - and that the voice that launched this world into being was itself the source of Jesus' mission and power. And so, they say, "Let's take him up a mountain, out of the ordinary world of Galilee and Judea, and let the splendor of his being and Gospel shine forth."

In presenting this scene, of course, the early Christian community did what human beings have been doing ever since recorded time. It went vertical! We have a tendency to do that – even in popular lyrics like: *Fly me to the moon / Let me play among the stars / Let me see what spring is like / On Jupiter and Mars // Fill my heart with song / And let me sing for ever more / You are all I long for / All I worship and adore . . .*

Maybe because we are vertically built, operating out of our topmost skulls – inclined to look down on things, condescending as it were – we tend to locate a “real” world upward – in mythical ways via Sun and Moon and stars as gods controlling our destiny or in philosophical ways as did Plato in drawing us away from this “shadowy, imperfect, changeable” earthbound world toward a “real” world of Ideas – ideal patterns or blueprints from which earthly things (like us) are but reflections that fade away. Indeed, we human beings seem compelled to take “head trips” to escape the gravity that ties us down – as today by way of mathematics – as fleshless as can be!

The verticality of today's reading certainly took hold on Christian tradition. As Christendom grew, images of Jesus as elevated – in mosaics – upon the inner dome of vast cathedrals perpetuated his transfiguration. I hesitate to mention the image of “Touchdown Jesus” that overlooks Notre Dame's football sanctuary. But let's be thankful that today's Gospel pulls the plug on the mountain top display – when it finally says: *Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.* For it's the down to earth Jesus of compassion and vision and suffering and self sacrifice that we value – and not so much his mountain top image.

Except that the mountain top image *does reveal* something else important. Even as it displays Jesus for what he and his Gospel really are in a graphic, sublime way, it also reveals what each of us is and can be - as more sublime than we realize – and capable of miracles.

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