

There is a story told about Napoleon during the invasion of Russia. He somehow got separated from his men and was spotted by his enemies, the Russian Cossacks. They chased him through the winding streets. Running for his life Napoleon eventually ducked into a furrier's shop. Gasping for air and talking at the same time he begged the shopkeeper to save him. The furrier said, *"Quick hide under this big pile of furs in the corner."* Then the furrier made the pile even large by throwing more furs atop of Napoleon.

No sooner had he finished when the Russian Cossacks burst into the shop. "Where is he?" they demanded to know. The furrier denied knowing what they were talking about. Despite his protests the Russian Cossacks tore the shop apart trying to find Napoleon. They poked into the pile of furs with their swords but did not find him. They eventually gave up and left the shop.

After some time had past, Napoleon crept out from under the furs, unharmed. Shortly after Napoleon's personal guards came into the store. Before Napoleon left, the furrier asked, *"Excuse me for asking this question of such a great man, but what was it like to be under the furs, knowing that the next moment could surely be your last?"* Napoleon became indignant. *"How dare you ask such a question of the Emperor Napoleon?"* Immediately he ordered his guards to blindfold the furrier and execute him. The furrier was dragged out of the shop, blindfolded and placed against the wall of the shop. The furrier could see nothing but he could hear the guards shuffling into a line and preparing their rifles. Then he heard Napoleon call out, *"Ready!"* In that moment a feeling the shopkeeper could not describe welled up with him. Tears poured down his cheeks. *"Aim!"* Suddenly the blindfold was stripped from his eyes. Napoleon stood before him. They were face to face and Napoleon said, *"Now you know the answer to your question."*

The lesson here is obvious: How can you describe a near death experience? You can't. It has to be experienced. Jesus' transfiguration fall in the same category of events which cannot be described. I think that is why Luke says that they kept it to themselves and told no one what they had seen. Well, at least they did at the time. Peter wrote about it later on in one of his letters to young christians.

But lets consider our reading about Moses first. This story about Moses on Mount Sinai shows what can happen when people draw near to God, actively and intentionally. *'When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me'* (Jeremiah 29.13-14). As Moses came back down the mountain, unbeknown to him, the reflected glory of the Lord shone from his face. The rest of the Israelites saw it, and in it they recognised the divine authority of the commandments that Moses brought with him.

In religious art, saints are often depicted with a circle behind their faces – sort of like a disk or pie plate. And while this looks a little one-dimensional compared to the computer-generated graphics we're so accustomed to nowadays, we all know that it's meant to represent their holiness.

It also reveals a quality we tend to overlook, that those who've walked with God glow with the radiance of God's presence. In the book of Daniel, we can read: *"Those who are wise shall shine as the brightness of the expanse; and those who turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever"*

Let's hold to those thoughts while we turn our attention to the Transfiguration. Most of us will know this story well as it is one of those that we hear every year. While reading up and listening to podcasts about the transfiguration, I have been made more aware of the awesomeness of this event.

Luke often shows Jesus praying before key moments in his life, and he includes it as an important detail here. Jesus takes just Peter, James and John to pray with him. Incredibly, they are heavy with sleep when they get to the top of the mountain. Can you think of another occasion where Jesus takes Peter, James and John to pray with him and they fall asleep? It made me straight away think of the garden of Gethsemane. I think this shows something of the disciples' inability to comprehend Jesus. On the mountain top, the divinity of Christ is revealed to them. They are woken up by the flashing light – the word used to describe Jesus' dazzling appearance is the same as that used to describe lightning. The disciples are woken out of their ignorance, their sleeping, to see the light of Christ. In the garden of Gethsemane, the humanity of Christ is fully revealed to them. They are woken up by Jesus to see him going to his death. The fact that they are asleep on both occasions speaks to me of the difficulty of really comprehending who Jesus is and what his mission is.

Luke also describes the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah rather differently from the other Gospel writers: 'They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, that he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.' The word Luke uses for departure is 'exodus', and that gives the story added meaning. This word in Greek was used to speak about death, so it may suggest that Moses and Elijah were reassuring Jesus by showing him a glimpse of the glory that lay ahead of him after he had died. But it also introduces a crucial parallel with the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The way of the cross will be a way of liberation, setting people free from all that holds them captive. This is illustrated in the healing story that follows, but it has a much wider significance. Jesus' death will be the definitive new act of salvation that will bring people home to God.

So what is this light? God's glory is often portrayed through light. We have already heard about Moses' face shining as a result of meeting God on Mount Sinai but here, it is not a reflected light but the real thing. This glory was coming off Jesus. Not reflecting onto him. The dictionary definition of transformation is *a marked change in form, nature, or appearance*. Jesus' nature has not been transformed but his form and appearance have been and, as I have already said, the disciples are witnessing the fact that he is God. We know that throughout the scriptures, light is a symbol of God.

The Psalmist wrote about God being a light to our path, the apostle John said that God is light in many different ways and in the book of Revelation, we are told that there will be no need for the sun or the moon as the light emanating from God will be more than enough. It must be hard to describe and easier to experience.

And so I ask you *“Is it possible to have a personal encounter with God and stay the same or are we radically changed in the Lord’s presence? For us too, whenever we come into the presence of God, we can be filled with the light of God’s love, and, like a prism, the radiance of God can be reflected and refracted through us to illumine and enlighten others. But it can be hard to describe. Like our story, it has to be experienced. Having stood in the presence of God on the holy mountain, Moses underwent an extraordinary transformation. Have you experienced any form of transformation? Have you sensed his presence, his light, yet found it hard to explain it? Let’s stay quiet for a minute or two, asking him to fill us once again with his light or perhaps even for the first time. We will then have a short time of prayer and finish by singing that wonderful Charles Wesley hymn, recognising Jesus as the Son of God and Lord and Saviour of our lives.*

*“Visit, then, this soul of mine;
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, radiancy divine;
scatter all my unbelief;
More and more thyself display,
shining to the perfect day.”*