

Psalm 99
Luke 9:18-36

Changed in Christ's light

I have spent – some might think, “wasted” – a lot of time over the years watching science fiction movies.

There are many pleasurable things about this pursuit, but among the more irritating things about science fiction movies is when they get the science wrong – at least, the science which isn't part of the fantasy. So, for example, after Luke Skywalker screams away in his X-wing fighter, having just got off the fatal shot, we ought not to hear the massive boom of the explosion of the Death Star in deafening surround sound. In space, exploding imperial ambitions don't make any sound. Explosions in space are very bright and very pretty, but also silent to any onlookers; there is nothing to carry the sound to our ears.

Rather more subtle, and of relevance for approaching our gospel reading today, is the way in which robots typically engage with other in these kinds of movies. So for example, C3PO and R2D2 actually *talk* to each other. (For those of you who, even after 39 years of opportunity, remain uninitiated in things Star Wars, you might at least have seen pictures of these two: C3PO is the skinny gold humanoid robot, and R2D2 the little white and blue trashcan on wheels). C3PO is a protocol unit, and so can speak English and many human and non-human languages; R2D2 can only squeak and squeal. There is, then, the need for C3PO to translate what R2D2 is saying for the humans in the story, and for us watching it.

But what I'm interested in here is why C3PO and R2D2 actually need to *say* anything to each other. What each machine has to do is first have its thought – presumably in some computer code – and then convert it into something which can be expressed audibly, generate the sound, and then wait for the other machine to hear that sound, translate it back into code, and go through the same process to reply. Consequently, communication between robots takes as long as communication between you and me. It would make much more technical sense for any exchange between C3PO and R2D2 to take place digitally and wirelessly, and for the whole exchange to be over in a microsecond.

Of course, if this were how it happened in the movie, *we* would not know what was going on most of the time, because the robots are central to the whole story and we wouldn't know why they were doing what they were doing. So, quite apart from the fantasy of the story as a whole, we are also tricked into the fantasy that a civilisation which can build sentient machines prefers to wait around for them to have extended conversations than for them actually to be doing what they were built to do.

What has all this got to do with Transfiguration Sunday?

The Transfiguration story is a striking one – very familiar to most of us, and probably quite problematic for many as well. What is this vision? How could it have happened? What is it supposed to communicate?

There is here clearly something extraordinary being indicated about the person of Jesus. I want to draw your attention, however, to one particular aspect of the story, and probably not the most striking:

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

What I'm wondering is: why they are standing around, *talking*? What exactly is there to discuss? Is there something to debate? Perhaps whether the Law does actually point to the cross? Whether there's anything in the Prophets which makes that outcome inevitable? Or are there some details to be finalised? Does Jesus need a bit of a gee up?

It's kind of a silly question, but what *are* they talking about? Can what is about to happen *depend* on this conversation?

Traditionally the church has understood the presence of Moses and Elijah to be a sign of the Law and the Prophets as the context for understanding who Jesus is and what he is doing. I'm not going to suggest this morning that there is anything broadly wrong with this understanding.

But there is a problem with this interpretation if it implies that somehow it is *clear* that the Law and the Prophets point towards Jesus. Indeed, it is often given to us to understand that this *is* clear, that the Old Testament anticipated the cross, that all the clues were there for anyone who could see them.

And yet, if this *was* all clear, *no one* actually saw that it was so.

The fact that no one saw these signs before the cross suggests a different thought about the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah: that it is the Law and the Prophets which have to understand that what is going to happen with Jesus is indeed the secret hidden within them. It is through the cross that everything is to be understood. It is to the cross that everything has been headed. And, so, it is from the cross that everything begins.

If it were the case that the identity of Jesus and the meaning of his ministry were dependent upon the Law and the Prophets, then it would be necessary for us to become first century Jews in order to know who he was – for us to have the Law and the Prophets at the centre of our own being before we could understand Jesus. When Jesus is shown to be conversing with the Law and the Prophets on the mountain top, he is shown to be engaged with the Everything of Israel. For this is what the Law and the Prophets are: where Israel has come from, and where it is going.

But nothing about Israel's comprehension of that Everything could make sense of the cross. We can say, then, that it is not so much Jesus who is transfigured here. Rather, in the dazzling presence of Jesus, the Law and the Prophets are themselves transfigured – seen in a new light. Jesus "talking" with Moses and Elijah is Jesus engaging with all that has gone before. Everything points to Jesus. More than this, everything points to *the cross*.

This is largely the traditional interpretation but the problem with it is that, for us today to get to the heart of who Jesus is for us, we have somehow to be transported to A Long Time Ago in a Palestine Far, Far Away. This is because the Everything which the Law and the Prophets were for Jesus is not *our* everything. The link between Jesus and the Law and the Prophets given to ancient Israel is crucial for an account of the faithfulness of God, but not if we understand it in a way which separates God from *our* time and place here and now.

The truth of who Jesus is for us is not separated from us in this way. The Transfiguration isn't just a Light-Spectacular intended to catch our, or the disciples', attention. It is also Moses and Elijah seen in a new light. It is Jesus and the cross – the crucified Christ – seen to be the mystery of all that is thought to matter. It is the cross as the secret at the heart of what makes us tick, what we fear, what we long for – the Jews then, us now.

What, then, makes us tick? This is the question which precedes any enquiry into the meaning of Jesus and his cross. At the heart of our being might be our sense of moral righteousness, our economic status, our family, reputation, wealth, beauty, desires – any number of things on a personal and social scale.

What is it about us which Jesus might transfigure, cast in a new light, if indeed all that his people held dear resulted in his being crucified? How do our desires in fact crush us, or others? In what ways are we wilfully naïve about what we profess to value, deluding ourselves and denying others what they might need? Our values are different from those things valued in Jesus' time, but they need transfiguring just as much.

Science fiction is just fantasy, even when it gets the science right. The thing is, most of our stories about ourselves and our future have a degree of fantasy about them and this suits us just fine, even if a few might need to be crucified for the whole thing to stay together.

Our laws and our prophets, then and now, need to be transfigured if we are to glimpse what it is we truly need, the secret at the heart of all we desire.

By the grace of God, may we be so changed in the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Amen.
