

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.(Matthew 17:2, NRS)

A precious thing on earth is beauty. And the perception of beauty seems to be an especially human sort of thing. I mean, our kitty, Nermal, *is* beautiful, but he seems not to *notice* beauty, nor linger with it. I hardly ever see Nermal, for example, gazing out the window admiring a pretty sunset. But we humans can do that: we can admire sunsets and wildflowers and all kinds of beautiful things. In fact, for human beings, life becomes parched if we are not permitted from time to time to see some beauty.

I have come to believe that beauty has something to do with heaven. I think that the angels share in our ability to perceive beauty, and so it is their everlasting joy that they are permitted to do that of which the Psalmist sings:

One thing have I desired of the LORD,
that will I seek after; that I may dwell in
the house of the LORD all the days of
my life, to behold the *beauty* of the
LORD...(Psalm 27:4, KJV)

And it is not for nothing that the description of the New Jerusalem includes images of beauty:

¹⁸The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel...²¹And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.(Rev. 21:18-21)

Indeed, I suspect that what we mean by beauty is that this is how heaven is, this is how God sees things.

Now, let your mind move ahead to Calvary and ponder beauty, including the contrast between the Mount of Our Lord's Transfiguration and the Mount of his Crucifixion.¹

Here in the story of our Lord's Transfiguration you see Jesus, free man and master that he is, *take* his disciples with him up the mountain; there you see Jesus *taken* by the soldiers and led to his cross.

Here you see Jesus elevated on the mountain; there you see him elevated on the cross.

Here, on the Mount of Transfiguration, you see Jesus glorious, with his face shining like the sun. There you will see him bathed with sweat and blood, his face creased with pain.

Here you see his garments dazzling white. There you see his garments stripped from him and gambled over by the soldiers.

Here you see light, in both the garments and face of Jesus; there you see darkness, for "from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.(Matthew 27:45, KJV)

Here, Jesus has the apostolic company of Peter, James, and John; there they who passed by reviled him and mocked him saying, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.(Matthew 27:39-40, KJV)

¹ Many of these contrasts are pointed out in the fine article by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary professor Dale C. Allison in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), 101-104.

Here, Jesus had the heroes of faith at his side, Moses and Elijah; there he has condemned criminals dying at his side.

Here, God the Father confesses of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.”(Matthew 17:5, KJV). There, Jesus cries out that God has abandoned him, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?(Matthew 27:46, KJV)

Here Jesus is alive with good work ahead of him; there he is dying, soon to be placed in a grave.

The great question of Transfiguration Sunday is whether Jesus is more lovely now, on the mountain, than he is then, on the cross. Is he more beautiful now, with his garments glowing and his face shining, or then, when he has been dragged through the mud? Is he more glorious now, when accompanied by the apostles and prophets, or then, when mocked by all who passed by?

Faith’s answer is that Jesus is exactly as lovely on the cross as on the Mount of Transfiguration. In fact, the importance of the Mount is that it is a revelation of the cross. And so, we believe that even on the cross, all battered and bruised as he was, Jesus is the fairest of ten thousand, the bright and shining star.

And so are you when you walk in his ways. No one is excluded from this beauty. It is available to all.

Martin Luther used to say that he preferred a poor girl tending a child to a priest in a golden chasuble:

For when a priest stands in a gold-embroidered chasuble or a layman remains on his knees a whole day in church, this is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor girl tends a little child, or faithfully does what she is told, that is regarded as nothing. (*Large Catechism*, “Conclusion of the Ten Commandments”)

Heaven sees us with more clarity and more charity than perhaps we even see ourselves. Young mothers and fathers, for example, sometimes get a haggard look about them — looking old before their time — because they have not gotten enough rest, they are worried about money and trying to make the ends meet, and the various responsibilities they gladly bear as parents wears them down some. Maybe their high school classmates at the reunion would look at them and say, They are not quite so pretty, not quite so handsome as they were back in high school days. But heaven sees things differently. Heaven sees beauty, where the world might see weariness.

Again, an elderly couple takes care of each other as best they can. Onlookers see grey hair and bent backs. Heaven sees the beauty of love long given and long received.

My wife Carol told me about a dear old man who died recently at the Wartburg Community. Let’s call him Andrew. Andrew was the father of four children. He worked two jobs – he was a butcher and a subway train conductor. There was never much money in the house, yet it was a happy and orderly house, with no financial anxieties. Carol was with Andy as he took his last breath and died. A short while later, one of the daughters arrived. She hastened to her father, placed her hand on him, and said, “You were such a good father!”

Now, you see, the world looking on might perceive only a simple and humble man. Nothing special about him, nothing much to note. But heaven looking on at this man’s span of life sees a great burst of beauty on earth.

And you are capable of such beauty too.

The crowds see Jesus dying on a cross and they mock him. Heaven sees Jesus on that same cross and perceives him beautiful, radiant, glorious.

The good news of Transfiguration Sunday is that from the point of view of reality — not just the appearance of things, but sheer reality — you are most beautiful exactly when you choose to follow Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.