

Last Epiphany b 2021 StC preached

If you believe what they taught you in Confirmation 101, this may be the last Sunday in the church year. [Hint: Don't believe what they taught you.] For if this is the last Sunday, that must mean that next Sunday, Lent I, is the first Sunday of the Church year. But how could that be? The first Sunday is Advent I, beginning the story of Christ's incarnation and birth. And what about the Last Pentecost, the Feast of Christ the King? Surely that tribute to the judgment of the World and the New Creation in Christ's Reign is the very last Sunday. But, no... And so it goes.

For, you see, our liturgical year is a cycle of firsts and lasts, deaths and births, advances and retreats. We're saved by Christ, right? But not yet. Not 'til Christ's return. We're saved at Baptism or at our first adult profession of faith, depending on whose theology we believe. But not yet; already but not yet until Jesus' final judgment and the beginning of another beginning in God's sage with our fallen selves.

Last Epiphany. What an ominous sound: the last time God will be revealed to us, to you, to me. The last insight. The last glimpse of new life. And, of course Last Epiphany this year follows a far more final feast of our national culture: Super Bowl Sunday, when it will be revealed to us who the greatest of all time is. It's also a week before my 75th birthday – and that sound ominous – and coincides with an ever greater cultural feast, Valentine's?. And it's five days before my mitral valve (named because it's shaped like a bishop's hat) five days before my valve gets repaired by a miracle therapy called MitraClip implants: Little metal clothes clips implanted to make my floppy valve flop just the right amount. Last Epiphany? Perish the thought. [Note to the perplexed: Writing this sermon in Feb. 6 just in case. So my birthday was a week ago and my procedure was the 9th. I pray this is not my first posthumous sermon.]

Yet on its own, the feast of the Epiphany, ending with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah transfigured beyond time but in time for Peter and James and John and now us – the Transfiguration provides not just an epiphany beyond compare. But it has also been interpreted variously by Western Christianity and Eastern Christianity to reflect two very different views of salvation. Indulge my gross oversimplifications here.

In the West, we have a forensic version of salvation: the World, the Flesh, and the Devil have us locked up, and only Christ can free us. There are two main ways Western Christians imagine this happening. 1) The bonds of sin are loosed when we make an adult profession that Jesus is our savior [what Evangelicals believe] or the day we are incorporated into the Church by Baptism and nourished by the Eucharist, confession, and good works [what good Catholics believe]. As Anglicans, we can believe a little of both – or something else entirely. Still, for the West, salvation mean's being freed from sin and given the gift of eternal life bought through Christ' Cross the rescue our sinful selves from bondage to the Devil..

In the East, salvation is conceived very differently among the various strands of Orthodox and Eastern Churches: Ethiopian, Armenian, Greek or Russian Orthodox, and the like. Often the word used instead of the Western term salvation – freedom, liberation – is Greek theosis, or English divinization. The meaning of divinization – their version of salvation – is that through the spiritual disciplines and sacraments, each of us grows daily into a more faithful image and likeness of Jesus – in faith, hope, and love. We stare at an icon of a loving Christ, and we become incrementally more loving until we have been transfigured into the image and likeness of the resurrected and eternal Christ. We don't so much merit eternal life as we put on our Christness like new clothes. And when we look into the faces of our fellow human beings – in poverty, need, sickness, or the fullness of life – we see the faces of Christ – Christ in poverty, need, sickness, and eternal life with and through the Father and the Spirit. And when we pray with ikons of Christ, we are transported

across the thin space separating our world and God's to be transformed by Christ's image and likeness and light.

How meet and right it is, how fitting to end this season of light, this Epiphany season on the mountaintop. For one goes to a mountaintop not only to behold the first light of morning and the last light of the evening in all of its glory. But the mountaintop also gathers dark and ominous clouds. In Scripture, the mountaintop is often a place of darkness, of sublime darkness, the darkness of that cloud of unknowing that hides the mystery of the light of God, a refuge where lost saints like Moses and Elijah go to be renewed. For God is not just a God of light. Our God is a God of darkness, but a God against whom the darkness cannot prevail. So, be not afraid; darkness prefigures light.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury emeritus – and now Baron Williams of Oystermouth, in Wales, alas, near a village named Mumble – is arguably the greatest theologian writing today. And a spokesperson of God can prevail, even with such a name. Archbishop Rowan tells us about his own understanding of icons in his fine reflection on a classic Eastern icon of the Christ in his luminous little book, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ*. He says, “Looking at Jesus seriously changes things; if we do not want to be changed, it is better not to look too hard or too long.... And what is true about Jesus is shocking, devastating:....The shock comes from realizing this means God's life is compatible with every bit of human life, including the inner terrors of Gethsemane (fear and doubt) and the outer terrors of Calvary (torment and death)....If we do not want to be changed, it is better not to look too closely.”

If we want to be changed. If we want. Do we?

As Archbishop Rowan tells us once again: “If only the vision of glory spared us suffering! But on the contrary, glory can only be seen for what it really is when we see it containing and surviving the disaster.” The false glory of earthly power, of military

might, of corporate riches, of opulent lifestyles, of star-studded evenings, of Javanka and Barron Trump, is a temporary glory, so fleeting, so quickly extinguished, so easily forgotten. The glory of last year's glamorous stars or boardroom lords or random, orange lipped, golden coiffed kings and presidents and mullahs and poobahs is old news fast. But Christ's glory endures forever because it shines through the darkness, even unto the end of days – and transports us into that light.

With the vision of that Transfiguration before us, let us pray for our divinization, not just our liberation again in today's collect: O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory. Amen.