

LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
FEBRUARY 15, 2015

The Transfiguration – that curious and crucial event in the life of our Lord.

What does it mean?

Why is it important for us on this last Sunday before Lent?

I am going to share a story – almost entirely true – from my misspent youth in the hope and belief that it gives a bit of insight into a mystery that defies rational explanation.

And because I like the story.

Charlotte Ann White was not one of the prettier young ladies in my 10th grade class at Demopolis High School.

Charlotte Ann had stringy red hair, and lots of freckles, and she wore glasses, and she was skinny – all knees and elbows.

Her clothes always looked like she had picked them out and put them on in the dark.

Charlotte Ann was smart – yes.

And she was a lot of fun – yes.

And she was kind – yes.

But – no – she was not pretty.

And so shallow youth that I was, I was less than enthusiastic when my mother began to encourage me to invite Charlotte Ann to the Jr./Sr.

Prom – that strange, uniquely American rite of passage.

Now Charlotte Ann's mother and my mother were good friends.

In those days there was an unwritten code of honor that required daughters of friends to have dates to all school functions.

“Why don't you ask Charlotte Ann to the prom?” my mom asked me at breakfast, without warning or preamble.

I choked on my raisin bran.

Mother ignored my theatrics and pressed on.

“She is such a nice young lady, and I don't think she has a date yet.”

I replied that it was only three weeks until the dance, and I was sure that if it were three years, Charlotte Ann still wouldn't have a date.

Besides, I whined, it was the last year I could go stag.

Juniors and seniors were required to be in the lead-out with date. And going stag was what my friend Jim and I planned to do. It was a lot more fun, and a lot cheaper, and a lot less trouble than getting a date, and buying a corsage, and picking her up, and having your picture made by her father, and taking care of her at the dance. I had heard horror stories from my older and wiser friends. My mother, however, was deaf to all my arguments. Her friend's daughter needed a date, and I was to be it. So she pressed on, and when her appeals to Southern chivalry and duty and respect proved futile, she sunk to my level and resorted to bribery. She would order and purchase the corsage. She would pay for a tank of gas. (Recently gone up to \$.26 per gallon.) And I could stay out until midnight – an hour past my usual curfew. That meant that I could take Charlotte Ann to the dance, dump her at home by 10:30, and still have an hour and a half and a full tank of gas to cruise around with Jim and the guys. Mother had won. I surrendered – though with honor – and Charlotte Ann had a date to the prom.

Still, it was with grave misgivings that I rang the White's doorbell three weeks later, the clear plastic box containing the corsage of pink rose buds clamped damply under my arm. As I sat in their living room, glumly responding to Mr. White's game attempts at conversation, I wondered what could be taking so long; Remembering some of my friends' snickers and choice remarks when they learned that I had a date with old Charlotte Ann; Rehearsing in my mind the humiliation I was about to suffer when I showed up at the gym with her. How could I have let my mother talk me into this? And then – finally - I heard Charlotte Ann and her mother coming down the stairs, excitedly talking and laughing. Only, when I looked up the stairs, it didn't look like Charlotte Ann. As I stumbled toward her, shoving the corsage in her direction, I saw to my amazement that without her glasses, her eyes were a shocking, luminescent emerald green, And her hair – fixed at the “beauty parlor” – was like orange flame surrounding her head. You could barely see the freckles under her make-up,

And most amazing of all, her low-cut formal gown revealed that Charlotte Ann was not really skinny at all.

A transfiguration had taken place!

A transfiguration upstairs at the White's house on Walnut Street.

And I stood there transfixed – as on holy ground – awestruck, marveling at the resulting revelation.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or run.

The obligatory photo, that Mr. White later sent me, shows a smiling, beautiful young woman in a green dress holding the arm of an awkward looking boy with a flat-top hair cut, wearing an ill-fitting white sport coat and a dazed expression.

I did not get to dance much with Charlotte Ann that night.

She was the "belle of the ball" - easily the prettiest girl there.

My friends, who had made those unkind remarks, were now leaving their dates to dance with Charlotte Ann.

And instead of dumping her at 10:30 as I had planned, midnight found me at her front door, timidly shaking her hand, not daring a goodnight kiss, which in her great kindness, she gave me anyway.

The next morning, to my mother's questions about the dance, I responded with what I suspect is still the teenage boy's ultimate expression of approval, encapsulating all the excitement and surprises of the evening –

"Aw – it was al-right."

In class that next Monday, instead of the heavenly vision of Saturday night, I was shocked to see the "old" Charlotte Ann – glasses, freckles, and sloppy clothes – the gorgeous creature that we now knew was Charlotte Ann, once again concealed by her casual humanity.

To her credit, she took it all in stride.

She was still smart, and fun and kind.

But now we all knew her true identity –

Charlotte Ann White was a "Beauty."

And in those days, there was nothing higher.

She now had no problem whatever getting dates.

In fact my mother and hers became concerned that she was getting too popular. (Couldn't you have guessed it?)

It was not a surprise a few years later when she was selected as a top beauty at her college.

She "married well," and so far as I know, lives happily ever after.

I certainly hope so.

Now, I'm not going to examine what a male chauvinist pig I was (am?).

Not going to comment on the illness of a society that equates physical beauty with goodness and worth.

The point of my little story is obviously the transfiguration of Charlotte Ann.

The revelation of her true identity – her real nature.

And the reactions and changes, which that experience, that knowledge brought about.

Charlotte Ann had been with us all along, day in, day out, for 16 years, but until that night no one – I suspect she least of all – no one knew who she really was.

All our future relationships were altered – sometimes radically; sometimes subtly – as together we and Charlotte Ann adjusted and accepted her new role and identity.

Her transfiguration one way or another transformed us all.

Now like all parables and analogies this one can be pushed too far.

Obviously there are huge differences of circumstance and significance between the revelation of a teenage girl as a beauty,

And the revelation of Jesus as our Lord and Savior – the Messiah -

The fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets –

The beloved Son of the living God.

It is his identity and authority that lead him to an ultimate confrontation and self-sacrifice in Jerusalem.

That is why his full and true identity must be revealed to his disciples, Why his authority must be established beyond a doubt.

And – and there must be a glimmer of hope for those who followed and follow him,

A promise of light after the approaching darkness.

A little Mardi Gras before Lent.

And so on that mountaintop – the traditional location for a theophany – for an encounter with God – Simon Peter, James and John see their friend suddenly glowing like the sun, and there talking with him, they see Moses, the giver of the Law and the great emancipator of the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage; and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, whose return signals the imminent coming of Messiah.

And as if that was not enough to overwhelm the disciples, there comes a voice from heaven, the voice of God Almighty, who says once again:

“This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!”

Listen to him who is the new Moses and the Messiah Elijah proclaims.

The beloved Son of God.

He has his identity – “My Son” - and authority – “Listen to him.”

Established once and for all.

The disciples are stunned, terrified – and they fall on their faces.

They have witnessed God breaking into their world.

They have seen Jesus transfigured with the glory of heaven – this man that they have been with – day in, day out – for three years.

They have heard him claimed by God as his Son, and invested with God’s authority and power.

And then – astoundingly - this same Jesus gently touches them and bids them rise and have no fear, and leads them down the mountain to rejoin their friends.

In one sense Jesus is the same man they have known and loved,

And yet their relationship has been radically altered forever.

How could it not be?

Once the true identity and authority of Jesus is revealed, not only he, but also those who follow him are touched and changed as well.

Jesus assumes his old appearance and easy relationship,

But now for all of us – for Jesus and for those who follow ever after

The darkness that awaits us on our journey to the cross can be faced, accepted - and passed through.

The Season of Light, which ends today – The Season of Epiphany - proclaims repeatedly that the glory of God has broken into the world, and now, with the Christ's transfiguration – a wonderful transient reality becomes the promise of an even greater and eternal glory. Jesus' disciples, then and ever after, learn that the light that has come into the world through Jesus Christ transfigures not only Jesus, but also those who follow him, and indeed, his whole creation.

The transfigured One calls us to search for that Epiphany light within ourselves,
To see God's glory in those around us.
Jesus challenges us to understand and accept our true identities as his sisters and brothers,
To claim our authority and power as adopted children of his Father,
To live a transfigured and transformed life.

The season of Lent – our annual dark journey – begins for us with ashes this Wednesday morning at 7:00, at noon and again at 6:30 that evening. Forty somber days, with Good Friday and grim death looming near the end.

But now we too have been to the mountaintop
and have seen Jesus transfigured.
We too know who he is; we know his authority; we know his power.
We too have been transformed by his glory.
And we too have the shining promise of Easter.
A little Mardi Gras before Lent.

That is what we have for now and that is enough;
As again we feel Jesus' gentle touch, and hear his kind voice saying to us,
"Rise. Have no fear.
Like Charlotte Anne, be transfigured.
Be transformed."