

6 August 2023

Exodus 34:29-35

2 Peter 1:16-21

Luke 9:28-36

Have you ever seen the movie *Shrek*?

It's a fun movie. If you haven't seen it, I have to apologise now and issue a "spoiler alert", because for the purposes of my illustration I need to give away the ending. And for those who *have* seen it, I have to apologise that I'm going to have to briefly summarise the plot for the sake of those who haven't.

Shrek is a green ogre who loves his quiet lonely life in his swamp. His life is interrupted when countless annoying fairytale characters are sent there by order of the fairytale-hating Lord Farquaad of Duloc. Shrek decides to go to Duloc, to demand that Farquaad allows the fairytale characters back. He heads off with Donkey, who is the only fairytale creature who knows the way to Duloc.

Meanwhile, Lord Farquaad asks the Magic Mirror if his kingdom is the fairest of them all. But the mirror points out that Farquaad is not even a king: to be a king he must marry a princess. The Magic Mirror offers him several choices and Farquaad selects Princess Fiona, who is locked in a castle tower guarded by molten lava and a dragon.

Shrek arrives at Farquaad's palace in Duloc, where Farquaad accepts a deal with him: he will move the fairytale creatures from the swamp if Shrek rescues Fiona.

In due course Shrek is successful in rescuing Princess Fiona.

Initially Fiona doesn't think much of Shrek, but as they journey back to Duloc they find they have more in common than they first realised, and fall in love. One evening as they journey back to Duloc, Donkey discovers a dreadful secret: he finds Fiona transformed into an ogre. She explains it is due to a childhood curse: each night at sunset she takes the form of an ogre, which is why she was locked away. Only her true love's kiss will return her to her "love's true form". Shrek had been about to confess his feelings for Fiona, but partly overhears the conversation and is heartbroken as he mistakes her disgust with her transformation into an "ugly beast" as disgust with *him*.

The next morning, Shrek takes Fiona to Lord Farquaad, and then leaves to return to his swamp.

Ultimately, due to the intervention of Donkey, Shrek goes to interrupt the wedding. Just before Farquaad can kiss Fiona, Shrek tells Fiona that Farquaad is not her true love and is only marrying her to become king. The sun sets, which turns Fiona into an ogre in front of everyone in the church, causing a surprised Shrek to fully understand what he overheard. Farquaad is dispatched by the dragon.

Shrek and Fiona profess their love and share a kiss. Now remember that only her true love's kiss will break the curse and return her to her "love's true form". Fiona is bathed in dazzling light as the curse is broken. But she is surprised to find that she is still an ogre: she had thought that she would become beautiful. Shrek, of course, replies that she is beautiful. They marry in the swamp and leave on their honeymoon to joyous celebration.

In the movie, Fiona is ultimately revealed to be who she really is – an ogre. And in what is called the Transfiguration, the event recorded today's Gospel reading, Jesus is revealed to be who he really is.

In the Transfiguration, Jesus is revealed to be who he really is – not just a good man, not just a wise teacher, not just a wonderful healer, but the Son of God, filled with the stunning glory of God, revealed as the true ruler of all the world in anticipation of the future time when his reign will be acknowledged by all.

But as strange as this all is, there is something even stranger going on. Elijah and Moses are apparently talking to Jesus about his exodus, his departure. In this mountaintop experience in which Jesus' true nature is revealed, the conversation is all about how Jesus is going to go to his death. The surprising thing about the way that Jesus is going to become ruler over all the world is that it is going to involve his dying a brutal death on a Roman cross.¹

¹ Wright, *Luke*, pp.114-115

When Fiona is revealed to be who she really is – an ogre – the responses others make reveal something of their own true selves.

Shrek declares that Fiona is beautiful – the issues of her particular bodily form are not the most important thing for him.

Lord Farquaad, on the other hand, reacts firstly with total disgust when Fiona is transformed into an ogre, but then declares that the marriage is binding and that that means he is now king. The transformation of Fiona reveals definitively that Farquaad is interested only in his own position. There is no real love there: Fiona was merely a means to an end.

In the same way, our response to Jesus reveals our innermost beings and our innermost motives. The key question for us is, do we recognise Jesus as Son of God, true ruler of all, and as a result place the whole of our lives under his authority?

It is interesting to reflect on the journey of the disciples up to this point: let's think about Peter, for example. A week earlier, Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was. And Peter had an amazing insight, and declared, "You are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of the living God." Moments later, he had to be told off by Jesus because he just didn't get the point that Jesus wasn't going to go about God's business by leading an armed rebellion: instead, strangely, Jesus was going to go to his death. Jesus told Peter off, because he was thinking about things from a human point of view; thinking about things in terms of what would suit *him*, rather than in terms of what would be obedient to God. And here on the mountain Peter gets all carried away again, and wants to hold onto the moment – "Let's put up three shelters, one for you, one for Elijah, one for Moses".

And then he is needing to be pulled up off the ground², perhaps wondering whether he had imagined it all. Peter fails, falls, and is lifted up again and again; and in time realises that beyond everything else he is called to listen to Jesus.

² See Matthew 17:6

This is the same Peter who, years later, was to write the letter we heard read earlier. Now Peter is having to counter tendencies within the community to deny the lordship of Jesus and his authority over life; he is having to challenge a growing belief that Jesus will not come again and that there is no glorious future lying ahead of us. Peter says in response “We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” The word picture of the day dawning and the morning star rising is about the return of Jesus at the end of the present age, when his kingly reign over all things will be made complete. Peter, remembering his experience of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain, is effectively telling his Christian friends the same thing that God had told him – This is God’s Son: *listen to him*.

Peter fails, falls, and is lifted up again, called to listen to Jesus. This seems to be a pattern for the life of every Christian. We too, of course, try our best, sometimes succeeding and sometimes coming up short. We, too, have moments of great insight and understanding, and moments of doubt and denial. We too have our moments of forgetting that what really matters is the fulfilling God’s purposes for the world. We, too, fall down in fear and are raised up again to go forth in confidence. We, too, are called to listen, called to search for what God is wanting to accomplish in the world, called to be partners with God in his work to care for, save, and bless all creation ... and in this way we too are gradually transformed.³

Listening to God involves many things. It involves reading the Bible. We don’t read the Bible to get cute little sayings, or little snippets of advice. We read it to appreciate the overall story of God’s work in the world, and of what Jesus has done, and of how we find ourselves in that ongoing story. We read it over and over again to get it inside us, so that through it God can speak, helping us to see how present circumstances and decisions fit in to the big picture. We need to read the Bible with openness, an attitude that says I am willing to be transformed.

³ David Lose, “The Transfiguration of Peter”

Listening to God involves praying. Praying involves both talking and listening. It involves bringing our wants, and concerns, and hopes in front of God. As we do so we find that sometimes our wants, concerns, and hopes need to be transformed – we might hear how self-centred, selfish, or needlessly frightened we are, for example.

Listening to God involves doing these things in the company of others – for God is at work in the Christian community, and we are transformed as our issues and hopes and so on bump up against those of others. We are transformed too as our understanding of what we have read and heard is tested with what others are reading and hearing.

At the end of the movie, Shrek returns to the swamp to make his life there with Fiona.

After the Transfiguration, Jesus comes down off the mountain into the valley with the disciples and is immediately confronted by someone facing a personal crisis, and a group of disciples who have found themselves unable to deal with it.⁴ It is rather like Jesus has come down from the wonderful mountaintop experience of being revealed for who he really is, and is thrust straight into the “swamp” of human life.

And I think in this is a really good reminder that Jesus’ work and ours means being involved in all the muckiness of real life. It is a little like the pattern of our services of worship: we gather together, we praise God, we hear from God, and we get equipped to go forth into the world as disciples again. At the end of the service we are sent out, to go “to love and serve the world”; and we do so, going “in the name of Christ.”

It will never do for us to try to remain on our mountaintops. In various ways, we are called down and out into the swamp. We are called into the world because this is God’s creation and God has a purpose for it. We tend to imagine too great a separation between the sacred and the secular or everyday, between the spiritual and the material.⁵ In contrast Jesus reminds us, and his life demonstrates, that “the

⁴ Luke 9:37-43

⁵ On this Schmemmann writes most compellingly in *For the Life of the World*. pp.17-28

earth is the Lord's and everything in it"⁶; in the transfiguration Jesus anticipates the time when God will be "all in all".⁷

And for us, transfiguration gives us a preview of the promise of a renewed world and our own transformation.⁸ As Paul visualises it "... we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."⁹

Just as Fiona was revealed to be who she truly was, on the mount of Transfiguration Jesus was revealed as Son of God, ruler of the world. And not just ruler, but the ruler whose care for the world and its people sent him into the valleys and swamps of human life. And we are called to follow in his footsteps.

*Then I saw his face, now I'm a believer!*¹⁰

Sources:

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⁶ Psalm 24:1

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:28

⁸ Garland, *Luke*, p.398

⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:18

¹⁰ For those who miss the allusion: the song "I'm a believer", written by Neil Diamond, features twice in the movie *Shrek*. My lyrics here are slightly amended of course, reflecting that it is Jesus I have seen and in whom I believe.