

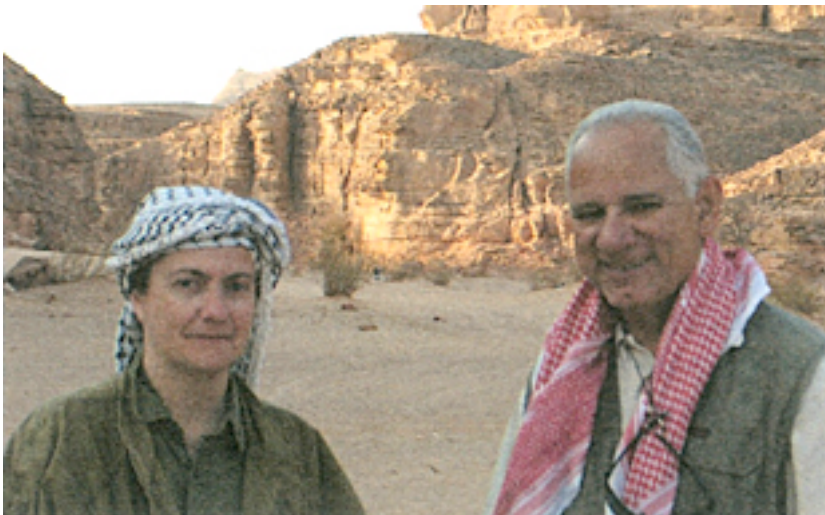
Transfigurations and Transformations

Emma Loveridge

I had Easter in York this year as Principle Advisor to the Archbishop, and it reminded me of what a wonderfully diverse world of Christian celebrations we live in. We went from Saturday night, with Vigil and Holy Fire at the candlelight service on the site of King Edwyn's baptism, to Sunday morning open-air total immersion baptism, on to the Minster where the choir sang psalm 150, which rang out and then lingered amongst the roof bosses. But this time last year I had stood for Easter in the Basilica Church of Saint Catherine's Monastery, still wrapped up against the early morning chill air seeping alongside the valley in the shadow of the mountain, which keeps the sun out until well into the day.

Two different continents, Europe and Africa, two different branches of the Christian church, Church of England and the Greek Orthodox, a city in York and a desert, Sinai. But what of course is so strikingly the same is a belief in transformation. It pervades every Christian story with the enormity of hope that each individual, whatever their circumstance of life, may come to rise up from his/her deepest fear and anger and from the very darkness of our human failings, which at times can haunt us, and be liberated, set free. And of course this is the theme at the very heart of Saint Catherine's Monastery, depicted in the apse mosaic of the Transfiguration. It is the space in the church above the altar where the sacred and the secular meet, where heaven and earth touch and God and humanity are held together in the figure of Christ.

It is extremely apt, for in the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus is seen by Peter, James and John, three of his Apostles, conversing with Moses and Elijah. Both Moses and Elijah have histories in the Old Testament associated with Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai itself in the Christian faith is a part of the theme of transformation. You may well remember that in the book of Exodus, when Moses thinks it is time for his people to move on from the desert, he goes up the mountain again to seek God's advice. He wants to know from God whether he will go with them if they leave the mountain. It is a turning point, a transformation in the religious experience of mankind, for in his answer God reveals to Moses



The Revd Dr Emma Loveridge, Director of Wind Sand & Stars, with Dr Rabia Tawfik in Sinai

that he is not a tribal God who lives in the mountain but a universal presence.

He gives Moses a sign, he sweeps past him in a great wind and shows him his 'backside'. For in the old Testament no one may look on the face of God and live.

Pentecost (Whitsun) for the Christian Community is the anniversary of the giving of the law, the Ten Commandments, on Mount Sinai, but becomes in the New Testament the coming of the Holy Spirit, the transforming

power again. The apse mosaic at Saint Catherine's stands in the same theme of Old Testament story with a New Testament interpretation. For in the story of the Transfiguration, Christ's face, the human face of God, is shining like light. His Apostles and, with them, each one of us, may look into the face

of Christ and live.

This magnificent sixth-century depiction of that Gospel story is unique, as it is the only mosaic of the Transfiguration which does not have a mountain in the picture. The story in the Gospel is also unusual, as in the story the mountain where the story takes place is unnamed. You can visit Mount Tabor, the mountain of Transfiguration, as a modern pilgrim to the Holy Land, but in the original text the mountain is deliberately unnamed. For it is of course any mountain and any metaphorical mountain where individuals, disciples, apostles, you and I find ourselves at moments of life when we must make choices, at moments of transformation. Mount Sinai is, of course, also a mountain where transformations can happen. Symbolically Mount Sinai and the mount of Transfiguration are similar.

Therefore as you stand looking at the Transfiguration mosaic in the apse of Saint Catherine's, with no mountain in the picture, you realise that you are physically standing on the mountain itself and that the mosaic is the tip of the picture. The story is three-dimensional: you, the viewer, are not an observer looking at a moment in history but a participant in the dynamic manifestation of Christ. Christ is not the representation of the law, as is Moses on his right, nor the representation of the prophets, as is Elijah on his left, but something greater, the divine human. You are standing on the mountain with Peter, James and John. You are present at the moment of revelation, of transformation, of transfiguration and you must choose to look into the face of the God/human Christ, or to walk away. The very fact that you have stepped onto the mountain makes you part of the mosaic itself. You must choose whether you will look and participate.

The Revd Dr Emma Loveridge is Principal Advisor to Dr John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, and Director of Wind Sand & Stars.