



## “Veiled in Flesh” (Matthew 17: 1-9) by Sarah Bachelard RE-SOURCE #1 — February 2 – May 27, 2023

Sarah Bachelard is a theologian and the leader of the Benedictine Contemplative Church, an ecumenical christian community, functioning both online, and from its base in Lyneham ACT, Australia (a suburb of Canberra in Australian Capitol Territory). She offered this reflection on February 23rd when the gospel story of the transfiguration of Jesus was featured in her Church’s liturgical calendar. For Catholics and many other Christians, this is the gospel for the second Sunday of Lent.

In this reflection, Bachelard draws on two contemporary writings — *The Difference Jesus Makes* by James Alison and *Temple Theology: An Introduction* by Margaret Barker — to offer fresh insights into the deep meaning of Jesus’ transfiguration, which leads us ultimately to the deep meaning of incarnation — to make the invisible God visible. The title of her reflection, “Veiled in Flesh,” is taken from the second verse of the Christmas hymn, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing:”

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail th’ incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.

Some excerpts are printed below.

Click here to read the full reflection

<https://benedictus.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Veiled-in-Flesh-180223.pdf>

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**“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,” proclaims the Christmas hymn.  
This is the meaning of Jesus’ incarnation; it’s what the disciples realize  
at the transfiguration; and now it’s our vocation, too.**

“It’s often noted that the story of Transfiguration is symbol rich .... But there’s a further dimension to this dense layering of meaning I’ve discovered recently that I find powerful and important ....”

“[T]he First Temple in ancient Israel ... built by Solomon, [was] destroyed in 587 BCE and replicated in the Second Temple which was known by Jesus and his disciples.<sup>1</sup> [Inside the Temple, the Holy of Holies] was surrounded by a veil, so ... **it’s easy for us to assume ‘the Temple was a place into which ... people went in order to offer sacrifice to God, who dwelt mysteriously and invisibly at the centre of it all.’<sup>2</sup> [But] what’s actually signified is a movement that goes the other way. The Temple is not, in the first instance, about us moving towards God, but about God moving towards us.**

[The major feast of the Temple in Jesus’ time was the Rite of Atonement when] “once a year the Lord would emerge from the Holy of Holies, come through the Veil into the created order, so as to offer sacrifice on our behalf. **And note, this was not a human sacrifice to placate an angry God; it was God coming into the world so as to restore the harmony of creation, the relationships that had gotten snarled up in the course**

**of the year.”** [Ritually, it was the role of the High Priest to represent God for the day] “dressed in white; he went into the Holy Place (beyond sight of those watching), and then came out again (having so communed in prayer with God that he has become ‘one’ with God), his white robe brilliant against the rich, multi-coloured fabric of the Temple Veil ....

There seems an obvious echo of this rite of Atonement in the gospel’s account of the Transfiguration, and it helps interpret what’s coming next. **Jesus is depicted as the High Priest, though he is not just symbolically but truly one with God. He communes with God in the space beyond creation and comes out into the world (dressed in dazzling white) so as to reconnect creation to its foundation and fullness.** At the Transfiguration, the disciples have a vision of God, in the person of Jesus, coming towards us to make us one.



[Another] feature of the Temple rite was that after the High Priest emerged from the Holy of Holies in his white robe, the other priests straight away covered him with a **second garment**. This was made of exactly the same multi-coloured material as the Temple Veil with one small difference. It was **shot through with gold filament, indicating that the one wearing it has come through from ‘the other side’**. God, who is in principle invisible, can now be seen ....

And it seems to me there’s something here in this image of a human being clothed in the ordinary fabric of the world, yet with the garment shot through with gold filament that is a profound resource. **For me, it offers a way of imagining what matters about our faithfulness to prayer and worship, as well as to the tasks and difficulties of our daily life. How else can the invisible God become visible, the immaterial become material, the unsayable name become sayable, except as it is borne and translated by actions, lives and words that are open to the reality beyond while faithful to the here and now.** ‘Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see’ proclaims the Christmas hymn. This is the meaning of Jesus’ incarnation; it’s what the disciples realise at the Transfiguration; and now it’s our vocation too.”

1 James Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*, Book Three: *The Difference Jesus Makes* (Glenview, IL: Doers Publishing, 2013), p.235. In what follows, I draw extensively on Alison’s account. See also Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004).  
2 Alison, *The Difference Jesus Makes*, p.239.