

This Is What You Can Be

Jesus knew what it was to be fully human

By ERIN RYAN

I once had this dream:

I had just finished clearing out my bedroom of all furniture. I'd taken all the pictures off the walls. The room was now bare of everything except the bed, which was spread with a white sheet. The white walls were smooth. There weren't even any nail holes. I stood surveying the room with satisfaction and a sense of peace.

A friend of mine came into the room. I motioned proudly around me and said, "Look, I just got rid of all my furniture. I even took the pictures off the walls."

My friend said, "Oh, you don't want to do that. You need your pictures." As soon as he said that, the pictures reappeared! Then he went on naming other things I should put back: "And how about this ... and why don't you put this here ...?" Every time he named something — a footstool, a dresser — the furniture would be back in my room.

He kept going on and on about what I "needed." My beautiful, spacious room was now filling up with all the stuff I had just gotten rid of. I was so frustrated that I was near tears, and I kept saying, "No! I don't want it! I liked it the way it was!" but my friend wouldn't stop talking, and the objects kept on returning.

I thought of this dream as I went over the August readings.

The Transfiguration (Aug. 6) is a story of imperfect human beings glimpsing the divinity that we all have the facility to share. What is it Athanasius said? "The Word became human so that we might become God."

Something is hard-wired within us to want ... more. We want transformation. *Theosis*. We want that light that is brighter than any earthly light we can imagine. Jesus showed his disciples what it means to be a child of God. On the mountain, he "was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than any fuller



Something is hard-wired within us to want ... more.

We want transformation.

Theosis. We want that light that is brighter than any earthly light we can imagine. Jesus showed his disciples what it means to be a child of God.

could bleach them" (Mark 9:3). Peter wanted to stay on the heights, but they had to go back down into the fray.

The role of a fuller, by the way, was to get rid of dirt and oils on the raw fibers of cloth — particularly wool, which would be greasy with lanolin from the animals. By cleaning the fibers, fullers made the cloth thicker; it meshed together better, with smaller holes. Once fulled, the cloth could be washed and then dyed.

To remove oils, fullers needed to soak the cloth in some sort of alkaline substance. Some in the ancient world used clay or ashes as this substance. But the most commonly available alkaline substance was human urine. In Roman and medieval times, cloth was cleansed by people treading on the material for hours in vats of stale ... *ewwww*.

Today, we have much less disgusting ways of making our clothes bright. Yet we still get stains on them, and

in spite of all the claims various laundry-powder manufacturers make to us, the stains don't always come out, and the fabric still pills and fades. We have to clean our houses over and over or the dirt overwhelms us.

Jesus lived in this reality, too. Would it have worked, do you suppose, if Jesus had come down point-blank as a divine being and said, "Look, everyone! This is what you can be!" — without first becoming a person who had to be born in a gush of blood? Without first knowing what it was like to get dirt on your feet as you walked the dusty road? Without understanding what it was like to get hungry, and eat, and then get hungry all over again?

Jesus' message works because he was able to create metaphors that mean something to us. He knew what it was to be fully human. All through August, in his Bread of Life discourse, Jesus opens our eyes to what is promised. "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst" (John 6:35, Sunday, Aug. 2). Those who eat this bread will transcend even death. "Give us this bread!" appealed his eager listeners.

That dream I had years ago, about the pure white room, tapped into this desire within me for heavenly perfection. (Of course, we are told to give up our possessions and follow him. But — though it would be nice to imagine I was so virtuous — I don't think that dream had anything to do with a desire on my part to embrace voluntary poverty.) My unconscious mind knew I am not yet done with the process of transformation. I wanted to stay in that perfect room, but my friend kept telling me it was impossible.

You can't stay out of the dirt. Otherwise, you're not fully human.

Erin Ryan is associate editor of *Celebration*. She lives in Charlotte, N.C. Email her at erinryan45@gmail.com.