

Sunday 7 August, 2016

*A sermon preached on the Feast of the Transfiguration by the Revd Canon Prof. Dorothy Lee, at the 10.30am Choral Eucharist to mark Hiroshima Peace Day.*

In August 1945, the USA dropped two atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing well over 100,000 people, not to mention those who suffered severe burns among the survivors and the terrible cancer deaths which followed. This was a moment of *disfiguration* for the people of Japan and, indeed, for the whole world: the only time nuclear weapons have ever been used in warfare, and with devastating consequences. Today we commemorate that event and re-commit ourselves to working for peace across the world, so that such an example of disfiguration should never occur again.

But today we also celebrate the feast of the *transfiguration*, a feast commemorated for many centuries in the Eastern Church as well as the western parts of the church. The story of the transfiguration originally comes to us from Mark's Gospel and it appears at the centre of the Gospel story, right in the middle, and just before Jesus begins his long journey to Jerusalem, to suffering and death. In this story, Jesus goes up the mountain with three of his disciples, and there several astonishing things take place, before all four descend the mountain back to the plain, where Jesus picks up again the threads of his ministry.

The first astonishing thing that happens is that Jesus' clothing is transformed, changed, becoming blazing white: the 'colour' of light, the 'colour' of the heavenly world: not really white at all. Jesus is now clothed, in other words, in heavenly garments. Because heaven itself is the place of light, the place where everyone dwells in light, walks in light, is clothed in light; the place where there is no darkness. Jesus wears the garments of heaven because he belongs there, as much as he belongs to the earth.

The next astonishing thing that happens is that two of the heavenly citizens come down and begin to talk with Jesus: Moses and Elijah. These were two of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. Moses, we're told, was buried by God in a secret place on Mt Nebo (Deut 34); later Jewish generations thought he's never died, but been taken up into heaven. And Elijah who went up to heaven at the end of his life in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2). Jesus now speaks to these two great figures of the past on the mount of transfiguration.

The ancient pagan world believed that the gods dwelt on high mountains: Mount Olympus, for example, where the Greek gods lived. And even in the Old Testament, God is linked to mountains: Mt Sinai, for example, where Moses received the 10 commandments, and Mt Horeb where Elijah met God, not in the storm or the earthquake or the fire, but in that still, small voice. Both these mountains are associated with revelation, with God's revelation, because mountains are seen as being very close to heaven. Mountains are places where we might well expect to encounter something of God. And here on this mountain, which is traditionally associated with Mount Tabor, Jesus and the disciples are standing, as it were, in the suburbs of heaven, close to God's abode and close to the heavenly citizens. It's not far, therefore, for Moses and Elijah to come!

These extraordinary events - the radical change in Jesus' clothing and the appearance of Moses and Elijah - have a terrifying effect on the three disciples. They don't cope very well:

they're frightened by it, they're dismayed, they don't understand. When Peter proposes building three tents - one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah - Mark makes it clear that he's just babbling; he doesn't know what to say. He knows it's an incredibly special event, an event of beauty and radiance - 'It is good, it is a beautiful thing, for us to be here', he says - but he really doesn't have a clue what's happening.

So, what is happening in this story? What is it that Peter doesn't get? Why is it so important - so important that lies at the very centre of Mark and, for that matter, the first three Gospels? So important we even find the story repeated in the Second Letter of Peter?

There are two answers to that question. In the first place, this story gives us an insight into the disciples. Throughout Mark's Gospel these same disciples fail Jesus again and again: they fail to understand him, they fail to grasp what the kingdom is about and how it operates, they fail to support Jesus later in his hour of need at Gethsemane.

The eastern churches have wonderful paintings of the transfiguration which they call 'icons'. In the pictures, or icons, of this story, the disciples are presented almost rolling down the mountain in fear and confusion. This fits in with Mark's overall view of the disciples. And it's a picture of our own lives at times; it tells us something about ourselves: in our failures, our confusion, our anxiety and fear. The three disciples represent us in our weak faith, our lack of spiritual insight, our misunderstanding.

There's also another group of three disciples later in Mark's Gospel - Mary Magdalene, Salome, and the other Mary - who manage to stay with Jesus in his death and burial and are there at the tomb on Easter morning. But they too are dismayed when they hear the message of the resurrection: it overwhelms them, it's too much for them, they can't grasp how it could possibly be true. Whoever we are, male or female, our hearts are often dismayed, often frightened; we often fail.

And that brings us to the second point about the transfiguration. Like the resurrection, it's a story of hope and joy for us, not a story to put us down or fill us with guilt at our inadequacies. That's because it's not just a story about Jesus' transfiguration but also about ours. In the icons from the Eastern Church, the light which comes from Jesus, that unearthly light of his clothing, extends to the three disciples. Even in their confusion and fear, their misunderstanding, their anxiety, a beam of light falls on each of them: a light that's full of love.

The transfiguration, in other words, is God's promise to us: the promise that we will be changed, be made whole, be transformed in the light and love of Christ. With all our failings, our mistakes, our wrong turnings and lack of faith, Christ's light shines on us: accepting us, holding us, enabling us to become our true selves in him. And this promise is not just you and me, but the whole world which will one day reflect that divine light, that divine love. Christ himself stands at the very heart of this promise. It's his light and his love that were speaking of, which come to us because he is prepared to confront the darkness head on: through his suffering and death on the cross, through his entry into our pain, our sufferings, our darkness, transforming it with the radiant light

Today, we remember a terrible event of disfiguration in our world that occurred 71 years ago. It's a frightening reminder to us of the constant threat of violence and abuse and terror in so many parts of the world, past and present: in so many of our respected institutions, including the church; and in so many of our homes. We live in a world created by God for beauty and harmony, for love and grace, for friendship across all our differences and diversity. But we also live in a world that often fails to live out that godly vision, that divine intention: a world disfigured, made ugly, by sin and evil and death.

The gospel tells us that God, in Christ, has entered into our darkness, into our disfiguration; God has not rejected us or our world. God assures us, in Christ, that our world will be transformed, transfigured, to become what it was almost meant to be: a place of beauty and love and peace. And that's as true for the people of Japan as it is for each one of us here today.

Our prayer today is that all the dark, hurt, suffering places, in our hearts and in our world, will be transfigured by the radiant love and beauty of Christ as he shines forth upon us from the holy mountain.