

Sunday 11 February, 2018

A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, The Revd Canon Dr Ruth Redpath

Readings: 2 Kings 2 : 1-12, Ps 50 : 1-6, 2 Corinthians 4 : 3-12, Mark 9 : 2-9

Prayer: Open our eyes, O Lord, that we may see you more clearly, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, day by day.

We live in a different age from that in which Peter, James and John witnessed this extraordinary, and in some ways puzzling, event in the life of Jesus. If it happened today, many, I suspect, would reach for the smartphone, seeing it as startling news to be distributed on social media.

I think I would have used the word “awesome” but then I am of the generation for whom that word means something quite different from its casual usage today. Perhaps you might use the word “surreal” though it too is a word used rather generously in a wide variety of circumstances.

Let’s try to imagine this occasion as if we were there **at that time**, an occasion for which the words awesome and surreal would indeed - in their truest meanings - be appropriate.

In the first days of his ministry, Jesus had attracted many followers, but he had called twelve in particular to be his disciples, calling them from their normal occupations, to live and work with him.

They had witnessed Jesus healing those with longstanding physical and mental illnesses and demon-possession. They had seen his power over nature in the stilling of the storm. They had heard him speak and watched him as he exemplified God’s kingdom values of justice and mercy in his dealings with people, irrespective of social status and background.

And as the crowds flocked to hear and see him, questions about his true identity had arisen.

In chapter 8 of his gospel, Mark describes a day when Jesus was walking with the disciples between one place of ministry and the next, conversing with them about this. He asked them what the people were saying about him.

It was being put about that he was Elijah or another of the prophets, they told him.

Then very pointedly Jesus asks them, “Who do you say I am?” It is Peter who gives an answer; “You are the Messiah”.

But it soon became clear that their understanding of what that meant was different from that of Jesus. As they continued their walk, Jesus confronted their assumptions. In spite of his present popularity, in spite of their embryonic belief in his messiahship, the road ahead, so he told them, involved suffering and rejection and death for him.

This was incomprehensible to the disciples. Again speaking for the others, Peter was adamant that this could not possibly be allowed to happen.

Today's gospel reading describes what took place six days later. In a very intentional way Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain.

There we are told "Jesus was transfigured before them". We don't use that word 'transfigure' in normal conversation. More often, probably we would use the word 'transformed', or simply 'changed'.

The Greek root from which the word used in the New Testament for transfiguration comes is the same as that from which we get metamorphosis. We are familiar with the idea of metamorphosis in biology; the transformation of a tadpole to a frog, is an example. What those 3 disciples saw was a metamorphosis, a disclosure of the full identity of the one whom they had tentatively called the promised Messiah.

They were dazzled by the whiteness of his clothes - more white than any colour consultant could ever conceive or bleaching chemical achieve - the whiteness as of pure light from another world.

They recognized two others conversing with Jesus - both towering heroes of the Jewish people - Moses and Elijah.

The voice from the cloud spoke words which are a composite of 3 well-recognised phrases from the Hebrew scriptures associated in Jewish minds with the coming one, one from the psalms, (This is my son) one from the prophet Isaiah (my beloved in whom I delight) and one from Deuteronomy (listen to him).

Was it any wonder that the three disciples were overwhelmed by such a sighting and by hearing words so full of meaning?

Peter's impulse - never enacted - was to capture the moment by building some structure to fix it in time and place.

To us it was as if they had been given access into the light of God's very presence and participation in the timelessness of eternity.

And then, it was all over. Jesus companions in conversation had gone. The dazzling light had gone. The cloud had gone. The voice was silent.

There was Jesus with them again, just as they had always known him and they left the mountain with him - back to everyday reality.

What can we make of this story, one which we consider each year at this time?

There is no direct reference to it elsewhere in the New Testament except briefly in the second letter of Peter where he speaks of being an eyewitness of the majesty of Jesus, and having heard the voice from heaven while on the mountain with him.

The details are, of course, rich with symbolism.

For good Jewish people, familiar with their past story, it would provide confirmation of the coming dramatic fulfilment of all their hopes. That it was Moses and Elijah who were seen speaking with Jesus was highly significant.

Moses was the representative of the law. He was the one who led the enslaved Israelites in their Exodus from Egypt. He had climbed Mount Sinai to receive from God the Ten Commandments. As he did so, the glory of the Lord, settled as a cloud on the mountain for 6 days.

Elijah represented the role of the prophets. Centuries after Moses, this larger-than-life man had confronted kings and challenged foreign gods. He too had conversed with God on a mountain, and was seen as the model for the prophetic figure who would prepare the way for the Messiah's arrival.

But they both disappeared; they faded into the shadows, because the one to whose coming the law and the prophets had pointed had arrived - Jesus Christ himself. The disciples would now be caught up in this story, embedded as it was in the past centuries of hope and expectation of their faith.

Then we have to acknowledge the importance of the positioning of this story. We have seen in Mark, and it is true also for the other synoptic gospels, that the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is placed at a pivotal point. It occurs as Jesus is setting his face to go to Jerusalem, at a time when he is endeavouring to accustom the disciples to the suffering that will take place there.

It is therefore not surprising that this incident is always considered on the last Sunday of Epiphany before we begin our Lenten journey to the Cross.

Having shocked them by predicting that suffering, Jesus now gives them a glimpse of his glory, a glimpse of his divine origins, **even though** it would only be in that coming suffering that his full glory, his complete identity, would be revealed. Such an experience given at this critical point would surely stay with them, furnishing some continuing reassurance as the apparently inexplicable, tragic story unfolded, even if the incident was barely understood.

And dare we say it, perhaps it also provided strength and reassurance to Jesus himself as he walked the lonely road of obedience to the Cross.

Did you notice that Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone about what they had seen and heard till after the resurrection? It was unlikely that they could begin to understand his transfiguration until after the resurrection. Looking back, post-resurrection, however, they would realise that they had been given a hint, a momentary privileged glimpse of what the resurrection would demonstrate for all time - life overcoming death, light dispelling darkness, the spiritual just as real as the material, with a very thin space between heaven and earth, time and eternity. Jesus, the man with whom they had walked and talked - Son of God incarnate and so bridging those realms.

I am sure that this story was familiar to Paul. He had received an epiphany of his own on the Damascus Road - at the time of his conversion. - as we thought about 2 weeks ago, and have depicted on our processional doors at the rear of our cathedral.

He too saw a blazing light from heaven and was knocked to the ground, blinded by it. And he, too, heard a voice - that of Jesus Christ.

He had been persecuting violently and vigorously those who had come to faith in the risen Christ. But then he had seen Jesus Christ and heard him speak, personally, gently, directly to him.

If Jesus Christ was alive as he now knew, then Paul, devout and learned Jew as he was, had to admit that he must be the Messiah, the Son of God, the very image of God. Paul's whole being was transformed by that revelation, and many times in his letters his wonder at this overflows.

As we have read today in his letter to the Christians at Corinth, he could say with conviction

“God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

At the beginning of time, there was a world of darkness and emptiness, a void. And the Creator said “Let there be light”

As St John tells us, it is the same God who expressed himself as light, a light shining in darkness, but unable to be extinguished by it, in the Word made flesh - Jesus Christ himself. In him, says John, we have seen God's glory, glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

He is the one whom Peter James and John saw and the one who has shone into our hearts and that of St Paul and all who seek to follow him

But the Christian life is not all about mountain-top experiences. For the disciples, for Paul and the Corinthian Christians, and for those of us who have found in Jesus Christ the light of life, there is no guarantee of endless experiences of wonder and awe.

In the telling of the transfiguration story, the gospel writers take great care to tell us that. Immediately after the excitement on the mountain, Jesus and the three came down and returned to life on the plane, encountering once more all the torment and brokenness and evil just as before.

Even as the road to glory led Jesus Christ to the Cross, so, as Paul says, we carry his death with us, so that the light of his risen life within might continue to be real to us. We are but clay jars, ordinary and imperfect, fragile and disposable, - but able through his goodness and presence within - by his spirit - to be ourselves gradually transformed,

transfigured - **and** to then **reflect that light** day by day, so that the eyes of those who have not yet come to see the glory in the face of Jesus Christ will be opened.

I conclude by reading a sonnet entitled simply "Transfiguration" by English poet and Anglican Priest Malcolm Guite.

(From "Sounding the Seasons" 2012)

For that one moment, in and out of time,
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.

There were no angels full of eyes and wings,
Just living glory full of truth and grace.

The love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face.

And to that light the light in us leaped up.
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within.
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.

Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar,
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.