

Sermon by Geoffrey Barnett at St Mary's Barnes

Sunday next before Lent

23 February 2020

There is just one story from Jesus's ministry which our Church calendar features twice each year, and that is the story of Jesus's transfiguration that we've just heard (Matt.17.1-9). The red-letter day on which it is formally remembered is the 6th of August. Why then do we always hear it on this Sunday next before Lent? The reason is that it forms a key element in the disciples' remembrance of Jesus's ministry; and before in April, we turn to our own remembrance of crucifixion and resurrection, we need to be acquainted with a story which is as significant as Jesus's baptism. At his baptism those present heard the voice of God proclaiming: 'this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him'. The very words heard by the disciples at the transfiguration.

And the point about Peter, James and John having this experience with Jesus on Mount Tabor, not far from the Sea of Galilee, is that they weren't around for his baptism and they needed to know the true presence of God for themselves so that they were equipped to carry forward His word in their lives. The transfiguration is as important as that.

But before I explore this further, we must take a step back and understand the link between the life and work of Jesus and all that had gone before.

Matthew's gospel is addressed very specifically to Jewish Christians after the sacking of the temple in Jerusalem, when Roman fury was turning from Jews to Christians. Such converts needed to be reassured that Jesus was indeed the fulfilment of the promises in their scriptures, that he was the longed-for Messiah. And here the roles of Moses and Elijah are crucial. Moses went up into a cloud on mount Sinai. He was called by the Lord on the seventh day; and the sight of the glory of the Lord, as we're told in the book of Exodus, was like devouring fire.

Both Moses and Elijah were believed by the Jews to have been taken up into heaven alive and not to have descended into the underworld, and this so that they might return to earth ahead of the Messiah. So, in the story of Jesus' transfiguration, we have another demonstration of the glory of the Lord as Jesus's face shone, like Moses' face did. Long held Jewish beliefs were being fulfilled.

And this brings me back to Peter, James and John, the privileged three at the transfiguration; and, remember, they were also the three whom Jesus took with him into the garden of Gethsemane, just before his arrest. So, they were with him on the mountain, in the vivid presence of God, and also in the garden, in his ultimate human agony, waiting on the turn of events. (Though, of course, all they could do was fall asleep.)

In our first reading we heard Peter's account of the transfiguration, probably written at about the same time as Matthew's gospel, some fifty years after the event (2 Peter 1.16-21). We can't be sure that the apostle Peter himself wrote the letter, but scholars think it's as likely as not that he did; and I find it powerful that we should have his personal account of such a moment as this. 'We did not follow cleverly devised myths', he says, 'when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty'. He describes the event in some detail and concludes: 'so we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed'. Like Jesus he was born a faithful Jew. Confirmation of scripture was really important.

So, we have the transfiguration on record in all three synoptic gospels and by Peter himself, who was there. Do you believe that it happened?

I am one who struggles to believe that Jesus knew, in his earthly ministry, that he was the Son of God (or as Matthew always describes him Son of Man) because he had to be one of us down to the core of his being. But, as we heard, 'as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead'' (17.9). This is at the heart of the story. The disciples had been privileged to share a vision of God.

The strength of Christian testimony is that it is continually grounded in documentary evidence, not contemporary documents, it's true, but ones written while witnesses were still alive. So, I don't see grounds for disbelief in the transfiguration; and doesn't this story of the presence of God resonate with experiences of encounters with God which others have had down the ages and to this day.

What experience of the presence of God have you had; I wonder? Can you identify a moment in your life when you saw a vision of God like the disciples did? I don't mean literally like theirs but having a similar impact. And I'm not speaking of moments of conversion to faith. Of course, some do experience

these, but I'm speaking of those moments when you find you are taken out of yourself into almost another state of being. That's a grand way of putting it, but it's the only way I can generalise about a state that can be triggered by so many different things and in so many different ways – in worship, on a mountain top, listening to music, or reading repeatedly the words of favourite poets. What precisely it is that pulls that trigger I cannot say, but when it happens it's different and it's joyful. And I hope that what I'm saying now might resonate with your own experience of the presence of God with you, your own moments of being transformed, of transfiguration.

Enough of words. They take us so far, but it is only in silence that we can truly be listening to God.

The psalmist tells us: 'On God alone our souls in silence wait'(Ps 62).