

**Sermon (The Transfiguration) on Sunday next before Lent at 10am Sung Eucharist
St Mary's Barnes on 3 March 2019 by Rev'd Sister Margaret Anne**

On this Sunday next before Lent we have as our gospel reading Luke's account of the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. In our three- year cycle of Common Worship modern liturgies this gospel story of the Transfiguration comes each year on this Sunday next before Lent, just three days before the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday. At the moment we are in Year C, the year of Luke, but last year, Year B, on this Sunday it was Mark's account of the Transfiguration and the year before, Year A, it was Matthew's account of the same story of Jesus' Transfiguration on this Sunday next before Lent. And also on this Sunday in all three years it is the same collect: emphasising Jesus' being revealed in majesty before he suffered death on the cross and asking God that we too might be strengthened to suffer with him and be changed into his likeness.

Key themes of this story are around suffering being the way to glory and majesty. In all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the context of the Transfiguration is the same: it follows on from Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah and then Jesus predicting his suffering, death and subsequent resurrection. When Peter recognised that Jesus was the Messiah, he did not really understand what he was saying. He did not yet understand the inevitable road of suffering that Jesus would need to tread. The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is unique in the gospels: here the miracle that occurs is not done by Jesus, but rather he himself is its subject. Jesus has gone up the mountain to pray with his inner circle of closest disciples, Peter, James and John. And while he prays he appears to them in majestic form. The three disciples are astonished to witness Jesus' face glow with brightness and his clothes become dazzling white. This is the only time in the gospel accounts that Jesus appears in all his glory, displaying his true majesty, and yet without the marks of the nails showing in his hands and feet and side. It is a glimpse of unadulterated glory that three of his followers are privileged to share.

But the key-note of suffering quickly follows. Momentarily the figures of Moses and Elijah also appear and speak of Jesus's forthcoming suffering and death at Jerusalem. It's as though both Jesus and his closest followers need to be given this moment of strength and encouragement, in which Jesus appears bright and transfigured, before they will later have to face the pain and suffering of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, his passion and death by crucifixion. And this spiritual pattern may be true to our own experience. We all have to face hard and testing times in this life. Some such times can be so hard that they seem almost beyond our capabilities of endurance. But at these times it is often the recollection of earlier moments in our lives, when we experienced something of real joy and profound love – those rare glimpses of glory - that the memory of such moments deeply embedded within our psyche enable us to keep going.

Jesus knew that in the end he would have to face the cross. No doubt as he approached Jerusalem the memory of his mountain-top experience of the transfiguration would have been an encouragement to him to keep his face set towards Jerusalem, and all that lay before him there. It would have been the same for his three closest disciples. Later, on the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest, they took fright and forsook him and fled. The few days that followed were full of pain and confusion and dereliction. Only the joy of the resurrection appearances of Jesus could transform their sorrow into gladness. But before the resurrection perhaps it was memories of experiences such as the transfiguration of Jesus that helped them keep together.

Mountain-top experiences are wonderful but sometime we all have to come down from the mountain, and get on with the hard daily task of ordinary living. Even Moses, as we heard from our first reading in Exodus, after he received the ten commandments from God on mount Sinai, had to

leave his close encounter with the majestic God and come down and talk to the people. The presence of God can sear us. When Moses spoke with God on mount Sinai we are told that –

“the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God”.

And the people were afraid to come near him. Moses put a veil over his face, possibly so that the people’s fear of such direct evidence of God’s majestic presence might be allayed.

Moses’ friendship and intimacy with God was so unique in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament times that he was privileged to communicate with God unhindered and unafraid. As Christians living after the death and resurrection of Jesus we too can enjoy even more direct communication with our God than Moses had. The blood of Jesus shed at Calvary has dissolved all obstacles to humanity’s experience of God’s love. We too with “unveiled faces” can behold glimpses of God’s glory. Though as the poet TS Eliot put it, they may appear as “hints and guesses” much of the time, rather than full-blown indisputable experience. But we can be given momentary insights into the nature of God. We can experience the transforming power of God when our fears and uncertainties are transfigured into love and trust.

The problem for us is when we all too often try to hang on to such experiences. Just like Peter, who on the mountain wanted to make three dwellings, one each for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. We might try to keep our special experiences of God safely in a box, but it doesn’t work. The God whom we worship is the living God, always calling us on into newer and different tasks and experiences. Peter didn’t realise what was going to happen next. A cloud overshadowed them, and

“they were terrified as they entered the cloud”.

And then the voice of God spoke: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

The fourteenth century mediaeval book on contemplative prayer called *The Cloud of Unknowing* is an extended essay as it were on the experience of deep prayer as described in the gospel story of the Transfiguration. The mystery of God is hidden in a spiritual cloud, and we pray to God who inhabits this cloud of unknowing. The author of the book recommends silently repeating a word such as God or Jesus over and over until we might eventually penetrate this mysterious cloud of God’s presence. And then, as in our gospel account, with all distractions gone, we too might discover, as Peter, James and John discovered, that

“Jesus was found alone”.

But such mystical experiences are rare and as many of the great spiritual writers such as the sixteenth century Spanish mystics St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross have indicated, we are not to become spiritually dependent on such experiences. What matters is our daily faithfulness in following Christ.

So today we reflect on this wonderful story of the Transfiguration in order to prepare ourselves for the beginning of Lent in just three days’ time on Ash Wednesday. We recall the divinity and majesty of Jesus as well as his humanity, before we follow him more closely on the journey of his suffering through Holy Week and his passion and death, and then rejoice in his resurrection at Easter. As we approach the great penitential season of Lent, may we pray that God’s Spirit will touch our hearts and enable us to offer our frail human nature to God in order that God in Christ may transfigure us and that we may know the power of Christ that is made perfect in weakness.