

Sunday 19 February 2023
Holy Trinity (08.00) & St. Margaret's (09.30) – Holy Communion
Sunday next before before Lent
Feast of the Transfiguration

Exodus 24:12 - end

2 Peter 1:16-end

Matthew 17:1-9

So, thinking first of all about our Gospel reading this morning, I'm left wondering... just what is the purpose of the transfiguration of Jesus? All four Gospel writers include it in their accounts, so they must have thought it was important. What is it all about? Is it supposed to be a confirmation and reassurance or is it supposed to confuse and alarm? And who is it for exactly? Is it for Jesus himself or is it for the disciples?

Just like Luke, when writing his gospel account, Matthew followed Mark in placing the transfiguration shortly after the disciples had all admitted out loud their belief that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah. So we see that the disciples have already made their decision about Jesus - so it isn't prompted by what they saw on that mountain.

Another puzzling aspect is that, if this is indeed God's confirmation of what they've already come to believe about Jesus, why is it that they're not allowed to share it with anyone else? Peter, James and John are the only ones to have seen it and they are given specific instructions that their news is embargoed until after the resurrection.

The fact is, that this whole episode that we now call the transfiguration is a strange parallel and contrast to the crucifixion of Jesus. If you're going to meditate on the one, you would do well to hold the other in your mind as well, as a sort of backdrop.

Here, on the mountain, we find Jesus, now revealed in glory;
There, later, on the hill of Golgotha is Jesus revealed in shame.

Here, his clothes are shining white;
There, hanging on the cross, his clothes have been stripped off and the soldiers are casting lots for them.

Here, he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest heroes;
There, he is flanked by two convicted criminals, representing the level to which Israel has sunk in its rebellion against God.

Here, a bright cloud covers the scene;
There, pitch darkness overwhelms the land.

Here, Peter is blurting out how wonderful it all is;

There, he is hiding in shame after denying three times that he even knew Jesus.

Here, a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; There, it took a pagan soldier to utter in surprise that this really was God's son.

Perhaps the whole point is that we need to see both the transfiguration and the cross side by side. We need to see the glory in the cross; and we also need to see the cross in the glory.

Then we come to our Epistle reading from 2 Peter.

By the time this is being written, the apostles' eyewitness account is being used to encourage a fledgling community that is beginning to struggle with doubt. You can just imagine that they're beginning to suspect that they have been sold a pup, as it were. They had almost certainly converted to Christianity in the expectation that the world would end soon, and that they would be on the winning side. But as the Second Coming was, in their eyes, increasingly delayed, perhaps they began to wonder if they had backed the right horse after all.

This is the context for the writer of our epistle - he is trying to offer them the strongest possible proof that Christ is the one approved by God. He is offering them a witness. Someone who speaks from his own experience. They need to hear again those words from God..."this is my Son, the Beloved"... they needed to know that they had made the right choice. In other words, for this early Christian community, the witness of those events of the transfiguration is being used to back up what Christians already know of the nature and purpose of God.

But what about us? What are we supposed to think some two thousand years after the event and still no evidence of a Second Coming? What can the story of the transfiguration possibly mean for us?

First of all, we need to be careful not to fall into the same trap that Peter did. Peter's first reaction is that he wants to do something. He needs a task. Let's build three dwellings he said. That clearly wasn't right because God chose instead to expose Jesus' identity, much like he did at Jesus' baptism when he said... "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him".

No exhortations to be up and at 'em here. There's no moral, no takeaway soundbite. No need to go off and sort out some evangelism project or renew a mission statement.

This is, though, still a transforming passage - transforming for us that is.

What could possibly be more transforming than gazing in awe, lost in joyful wonder, just being amazed at the glory that is Jesus Christ. What was it God said on that mountain? "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

"Listen to him"... Be quiet. Be available - not to go and do, but just to be and adore. Let it linger. Don't do anything with it. Take time to be still and know that God is God.

At this stage preachers are often tempted to look for an illustration to cement the point. I can't do that today, because nothing compares to this. Nothing is like it. It is its own illustration. Just trust the glory of Jesus. So, as we sit, let's pray...

Lord as we gather here in this place and this time,
a familiar place,
a special time set in our calendars, the Feast of the Transfiguration,
we thank You that we are here to meet with You afresh.
May our gathering today be a time and space when we find a moment of
meeting with You when that veil, that at times covers our world and our lives,
is removed and we see Your glory.
Glory revealed in the beauty of the universe You have created,
beauty revealed in the community we are part of,
beauty revealed to us in Your precious word,
and most of all, beauty revealed in the love of Your Son, Jesus Christ.
Help us again today to come away with You to a quiet place,
to meet with You in new ways,
ways that help us glimpse how things really are
when we truly come into Your presence,
when we truly allow Your light to transform us and the whole world.

Amen.