



**Exodus 24.12-18**  
**Matthew 17.1-9**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> February 2020**

**Transfiguration – don't be too dazzled!**

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Just before Lent, every year, the Church goes mountain climbing. That's because the traditional place the Lectionary takes us to on this Sunday before Lent is what's become known as the Mount of Transfiguration. That shimmering moment when Jesus seems to shine with the glory of heaven.

In a way it's a rather appropriate climax to the season of Epiphany which officially ends in the Church's calendar today. Epiphany is bookended with light. It all begins with a shining star guiding Magi from the East to visit the Christchild and today it ends with this same Jesus, the Day Star from on high, transcendent with heavenly light. There's a certain symmetry in the season of Epiphany.

So what are we to make of this mountain-top experience given to jaw dropping disciples Peter, James and John?

As with so many 'visionary' narratives of the bible the point is not did it happen exactly as described but what is the conviction, the message, the statement made by the vision.

What does transfiguration mean in the Jesus Story? And what could it mean in ours?

On that day the disciples look at a Jesus whose face is shining and whose clothes are white.

Matthew is an artist here, painting a stunning picture, one that glows with heavenly light. And it has echoes. It reminds us of other scriptural paintings when earth seems to touch heaven's brilliance. It reminds us of Moses walking down Sinai, his face glowing as he holds the ten commandments and it foreshadows the dawn of Easter Day when the visitors to the tomb meet with angels dressed in dazzling robes.

Again and again the Bible contrasts darkness with light. Light becomes one of the great themes of scripture. Without God, it says, we are like a people walking in darkness, with God we enter a new day and bask in the life-giving rays of the sun.

Maybe we talk of dark days even as we long for a moment, if you'll pardon me mixing up my metaphors, when we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

In the story of Transfiguration Jesus shines and isn't that because our understanding of God is that He is a God of light.

In the story of The Exodus God is described as leading the people with a bright cloud by day and bright fire by night. And when the second temple was rebuilt, so the story of Hanukkah goes, at its dedication the temple menorah stayed alight for eight days even though only one day's worth of oil could be found.

I think we long for our stories for be filled with God's light too. A light to guide and comfort us, a light to take away our fears.

Common Prayer go:

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, *And in your mercy. Defend us from all perils and dangers of this night*

So, in some ways the story of Transfiguration is part of a biblical tradition of presenting God, and the things of God, in terms of light.

We don't know what James and John thought of all this. They seem to remain tantalizingly anonymous in the story, just members of the cast. It's Peter who gives us the running commentary.

We are told it was just six days after that moment at Caesarea Philippi when he seems at one moment to really get who Jesus was, only to spoil it all by arguing with him about the necessity and importance of the cross.

Just like us, Peter is a constant 'work in progress'. When it comes to faith it's like he takes one step forward regularly followed by two steps back.

And so, he's often criticised in today's story for wanting to build booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, as if he could capture this moment for ever and lock up the dazzling light of that day behind a door.

Just maybe we could go a little easier on Peter here. Because isn't the idea of building a shelter for holy things, or even God himself, part of Peter's tradition? There is even a Festival of Booths in the Jewish liturgical calendar, and in the Wilderness Years the people erected a portable Tabernacle during their journey, made an Ark of the Covenant for the nation's most precious religious symbols, and once in a land to call their own place a Temple at the centre of their capital city which contained the Holy of Holies, representing the physical manifestation of God at the heart of the nation. There was, when you think of it, lots of booth building going on one way or another!

And maybe this tradition was, in fact, a way of welcoming God. A tradition of hospitality and putting him at the centre of our existence.

In one corner of Methodist Central Hall, on the ground floor which used to house a branch of the Midland Bank within the building, there is a space that has recently been transformed into a beautiful weekday chapel, always open even when the Great Hall upstairs is hired out for other functions. If you sit in this intimate Methodist Chapel that was once a bank, there are two huge windows to the left of the communion table framing Westminster Abbey which is just across the road.

I think it's great that AFC is a church set on top of a hill, just off centre here in Top Amersham and surely our prayer is that we might shine out to Woodside Road and beyond with the light of Christ.

But our history is minute compared to Westminster Abbey's. The first church on that site was consecrated on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1065. For 955 years, almost a millennium, Christian folk have sought, not to capture or contain God in a building at the centre of our capital city, but to say this building honours God and might be, for all who pass through its doors, a

meeting place with Him.

Well, we really don't know what was going on in Peter's mind, and perhaps he didn't either, but I'd like to think he too wanted to honour and treasure the light he'd found.

But I think that leads us on to an important, and perhaps buried aspect of the story and it's this: don't get too dazzled!

Now that may seem a bit counter intuitive. After all, isn't that the whole point of the Transfiguration – to be blown away by it all?

Well, yes – in a mystical sense it's a sort of foretaste of Easter but placed halfway through Jesus' ministry. And maybe it's sited here in the story to encourage those of us reading the gospel to simply keep going.

But, the reality is that even on Jesus' Dazzling Day, there is a warning here that faith in God cannot just rely on such mountain top moments.

The first hint we get of this wider perspective of God is that part of the text that so reminds us of Jesus' baptism and the moment he emerges from the water hearing the words from heaven: This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Well, at the Transfiguration that divine voice repeats that approval with an addition: *Listen to him*.

We might long for moments when faith dazzles. Such occasions may be rare, much more common in our pilgrimage is the constant need for us, say as we read the bible, to become good listeners to God.

To listen out for him and catch his voice of encouragement, prompting, rebuke or affirmation.

Peter needed this, as we all do. At Caesarea he had taken Jesus seriously which is good, but he revealed that he hadn't really listened to the whole message of Jesus because he declared he saw no need for the cross.

So now, at this dazzling moment Peter is reminded that just as important as the heightened moment of worship is regularly listening and learning from Jesus.

Rob Bell, in his book *Love Wins*, says 'Some Jesuses should be rejected'.

Peter needed to reject the idea that Jesus would win the day by power, and he needed, instead, to start listening to the real Jesus who spoke of a cross and loving service as being the very essence of God.

Don't get too dazzled; remember to listen and remember the cross.

Don't get too dazzled either by a transcendent Jesus.

The Transfiguration, when Jesus is described as shining with a heavenly glory, was for brief and passing moment.

The real glory of Jesus is that he shared this life with us, and so hallows the life all around us.

I think we glimpse this in the story. The three disciples who witnessed the light upon the mountain that day are terrified, and the narrative says: *Jesus came up to them, touched them and said, Do not be afraid*.

It's just one line but it says so much.

Even at the point when the gospel writer wants to paint Jesus in the colours of heaven, the subject of the painting breaks away from that depiction and becomes, once more, the incarnate one, Jesus of Nazareth, the one who held children in his arms to bless them, the one who weeps at the grave of a friend, the one who is moved by the hunger of the crowd. In short, this is the one who shares our life, not from afar but alongside.

We sometimes fail to see the glory of God in our humanity. We bear his image, the bible says, and sometimes the moments God will be closest to us are in the touch of another person lovingly coming alongside us in support, friendship and love.

These three witnesses to a day that sparkled also came away from that day remembering that one of the most meaningful moments they encountered up the mountain was when Jesus came alongside them, and touched them saying: *Do not be afraid*.

And lastly, don't get too dazzled, because – well, perhaps there's no way to soften it, they had to come down. Yet, in the coming down, Jesus walked alongside them.

I find that so encouraging and inspiring, the idea that the presence of God isn't locked up in churches, or religious conferences, services or retreat houses. God breaks out of religion and becomes part of all life. Isn't that the message of Matthew 17? Jesus walked down the mountain with his disciples, back to Galilee and then on to Jerusalem.

Just as God, by his Spirit, walks alongside us as we leave church this morning to pick up the tasks of a new week.

And so, since this new liturgical Church Year started in Advent and took us through Christmas, we now leave Epiphany and this week, on Ash Wednesday, we enter the season of Lent which, in six weeks time will take us on to Easter. And at every step we live in, and learn from, the Jesus' Story.

I trained for the ministry in South London and near my college stands two enormous transmitting aerials. They were local landmarks, totally unmissable, because until Canary Wharf was built, they were the tallest structures in London. The BBC transmitter was at Crystal Palace, its ITV counterpart on Beulah Hill in Croydon. I remember once climbing to the top of St Paul's Cathedral and looking out towards South London and seeing these two masts standing proud on the horizon, pinpointing my theological college right in between them.

Some like to remind us that Lent has, not two high transmitters, but two mountains either side.

The first is the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus in dazzling glory. The second is Mount Calvary. Jesus wearing a crown of thorns.

In the coming days of Lent we will join with our Lord as he walks between the two, and along the way we will learn much of meekness and majesty.

May it be so, in the name of the one called 'Beloved', who, even as he shone with brilliance of heaven, calls us to both to listen and follow. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2020*