2 Kings 2.1-12 O.T.p.306

Mark 9.2-9 N.T.p.3711th February 2024

## Metamorphosis

*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
Last summer, whilst on holiday in Kitzbuhel, Austria, we took the cable car up the mountain every day. It was, of course, the cheat’s way of achieving wonderful views with the minimum of effort. Once at the top and looking over the Tyrol range to the Kaiser mountains on the horizon the views were breath taking. Indeed, over the winter I’ve been tuning into the webcams that today show these slopes not as lush green and full of walkers but shining white with snow welcoming thousands of skiers.

I remember a previous trip to Austria and a last day visit to the top. Down in the village it was a grey and misty day but as tomorrow we’d be heading home, we hopped onto the chair lift. As we made our way through the low cloud cover and emerged the other side, we were greeted the other side by the most sparkling and brilliant day possible. The cloud had sunk low in the valley and covered the village, yet at the summit there was intense blue sky.

Mountains always seem to inspire, whether you’re reading sacred texts like the Bible or secular ones like Lord of the Rings. Great encounters invariably happen on mountains.

There is something special about standing on the brow of a hill and catching the clouds as they pass by.

And that’s the picture we have on this Transfiguration Sunday – it’s the image, the vision, of Jesus being touched by heaven’s splendour – it’s almost like an icon from the Orthodox tradition – a window into the eternal.

Just like Moses going up a hill to receive the Ten Commandments and Elijah sheltering on a mountain before seeing the Lord pass by – so Jesus ascends a hill with Peter, James and John and there his earthly body seems to be transfigured into a heavenly one. A kind of wonderful metamorphosis.

Over these last few weeks we have been in that Church season called Epiphany – a celebration of the way God chose to reveal himself – primarily through his Son, Jesus Christ. Next week we’ll have entered the season of Lent – a much more mysterious season as Jesus is misunderstood and questioned – his message is interpreted wrongly, and his actions are criticised. Even at the cross his own disciples became afraid and confused.

Transfiguration Sunday – or ‘Quinquagesima’ as it used to be called (a good word if you are playing Scrabble) is a sort of bridge between the two. It’s the light before the darkness – a sort of hint of Easter. Indeed, some scholars actually think this was a post Easter event that the gospel writers have included pre-Easter just to emphasise a growing understanding of the authority of Jesus. A sort of taste of things to come the other side of the cross. Others consider this a vision story rather like a parable. Its importance never resting on its historicity but its message that Jesus stood in the tradition of Moses and Elijah, bringing in that Kingdom of God.

Whatever you think of the origins of the Transfiguration of Jesus it is at one and the same time both similar to, yet distinct from the Baptism of Jesus. They are both remarkably similar and are often thought of as a pair. They are connected in the sense that on both occasions we have God the Father blessing his Son. So, at the Jordan and on the mountain, we are told there is a voice that came from heaven declaring this Jesus to be beloved – ‘*my beloved son’*. And surely that is one of the most touching moments of the Jesus story – two moments when the ultimate encouragement came his way – the affirmation of God the Father resting upon God the Son.

Yet before we get carried away and think the Baptism and Transfiguration were basically repeats of themselves it’s often pointed out that the declaration was heard differently in each story. At the Baptism we get the impression that only Jesus heard it – it was intensely personal and not really public, only passed on by him to his disciples later on. But at the Transfiguration it’s the other way round - public not just personal. I think Australians might call the Transfiguration ‘Full On’! Nothing seems to be held back – Jesus clothes and face shines – the voice of God is heard – a moment when heaven seems to touch the earth. A dramatic breaking in of God’s glory.

No wonder Peter got tongue tied on the mountain. The gospel says he hardly knew what to say. What could be the appropriate response to such a revelation? So, in his bewilderment this most attractive of disciples, and a very human one at that, blurts out that perhaps they could build a booth, a wayside shrine and capture the glory of the moment; bottled and preserved, contained and tamed.

Well, perhaps we have been following Peter’s advice for generations. We so, so want a gothic cathedral to house God or a spiritual experience to contain his very essence – yet in reality we only ever glimpse the divine and we can certainly never ever capture it.

Eventually, in the narrative, this brief encounter must come to an end. It was only ever an interlude and however much they might have wished it, this glimpse of heaven was temporary. They had to come down from the mountain. And strangely as they did so Jesus asks them to keep what they have seen a secret. Perhaps it would be misconstrued as many of the miracles were and Jesus wants the gospel accepted on its own merits and without razzmatazz. Whatever the reason this incident, he requested, should remain under wraps until after his resurrection.

I wonder what your reaction is to the Transfiguration? I’ve been trying to figure out mine.

I confess that I’m not a fan of only Peter, James and John being there. Perhaps I’m being unnecessarily pedantic, but I confess it seems somewhat exclusive to me – especially the absence of Andrew, Peter’s brother! And I’m always suspicious when one group hints they’ve be blessed by a deeper spiritual experience than another. It’s that sort of competitive spirituality that has so fractured and splintered the Church these last two thousand years.

In a sense I’m a bigger fan of Pentecost than Transfiguration because on that occasion God’s blessing seems chaotically and wonderfully generous.

But maybe I’m missing the point, and perhaps we all are if we choose to dissect today’s gospel reading literally. As one commentator puts it: The Transfiguration is not to be *‘figured out but appreciated’*.

So what might I appreciate about this narrative?

You’ll have your own observations, but I’ve made a list of three which I want to share with you as I close.

This story makes me appreciate that heaven does at times touch earth. I don’t know how that really happens, but I think I’ve known it happen many times. I don’t see people in shining light but I sometimes glimpse it in a supportive relationship, a generous act, a moment of worship or a prayerfully shared journey of struggle -something so precious, so profoundly moving that it feels as if life at that moment is blessed – blessed by God, touched by heaven and I’m deeply, deeply grateful for such moments.

And this story, secondly, makes me appreciate the ups and downs of life. I suppose that’s the obvious metaphor from today – on top of a mountain for a brief moment, then back down to the valley to get on with the work. You might say it’s about *Inspiration* followed by *Perspiration*! But aren’t we all thankful for the inspiration that comes our way. We need to be inspired. We need to be energised by our faith in God. And that may come through private prayer, joint bible study, shared worship – a conference, or a meeting. And it comes not only in church, because something of the divine can bless us in concert hall, a family gathering or a walk through the countryside. We are blessed indeed when such moments come our way. They shine for us – and transfigure our understanding of God, ourselves and the world around us.

And thirdly – maybe most importantly – I begin to appreciate through this story that Love is at the centre of the universe. What could God have said about Jesus at his Baptism or Transfiguration? Here is truth? Here is power? Instead, he says: Here is Love - You are my beloved. On this Valentine’s week it’s worth saying from a pulpit that knowing we are loved – beloved of God – can give meaning and purpose to all our lives.

The Transfiguration – like much that is part of the Christian Narrative *– ‘is not to be figured out, but appreciated’*.

And may that be for us – as we stand at this bridge Sunday between Epiphany and Lent – a blessed experience in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ian Green Amersham 8th February 2024