

Sermon: Transfiguration of our Lord

6 August 2017

So today we celebrate the feast of The Transfiguration of our Lord. .

Everyone who has read the Harry Potter books, or been to one of the Harry Potter films, may remember that at Hogwarts School *Transfiguration* is the name given to the subject of Magic Spells. More recently it's the name of a horror film about vampires. Not very helpful for us when we are celebrating the feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord. When we hear the story of the Transfiguration in the Gospels we need to be clear that this is not a story about magic, nor of course about horror. It is an episode in Jesus' life, recorded in the first three of the Gospel and witnessed by his closest friends. As St Peter was later to write in his second letter, which we heard read a few minutes ago: "*We were eye-witnesses of his majesty*'

When we hear a Gospel story, it is natural to assume that the writer was present, and is giving us a first-hand account of what happened. But the Gospel writers were not like reporters, taking notes on what happened at the scene. They are people who know the stories, and who have prayed & reflected on them. They want to express the meaning of these stories. They write not in the language of a newspaper or prose, but in the language of poetry and metaphor. As William Barclay, one of the widely respected commentators of modern times writes: "What happened there on the mountain of Transfiguration we can never know. But we do know that something tremendous did happen." Something almost indescribable. Not surprising therefore that the details vary a little between the 3 Gospel writers. But the general picture is clear enough.

As Luke records what happened, he tells us Jesus climbed up a mountain with Peter, John & James, his closest companions. The mountain is not named in any of the Gospels, but traditionally it is Mt Tabor in Galilee. Today pilgrims can either walk up, or are transported in taxis up the narrow spiraling road to the summit, where a church was built many many centuries

ago.. Luke tells us: “*There the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothes became dazzling white.*” Luke carefully avoids the word used by Matthew & Mark – *metamorphosis* – which had unwelcome pagan associations, of gods changing into human beings or even animals - and for us today might suggest natural process by which caterpillars change into butterflies. But Transfiguration, as Luke says, means a change in appearance. Luke actually says he looked other or different from normal.

The Eastern Orthodox Church, which keeps the Transfiguration as a great Feast on a named Sunday every year, depicts the event in many famous icons. A typical Eastern icon shows a rocky mountain with Jesus standing on its summit in the centre dressed in dazzling white clothes, arranged in a diamond pattern, suggesting the reflecting light on a brilliant jewel. On one side of him is Elijah praying, on the other is Moses, with a book suggesting the Law of Moses. Together they embody the Old Testament witness and hope of a Messiah, a Saviour. Above them is the cloud, which itself a symbol of God’s presence and glory, as told in Exodus chapter, the source of the Divine Voice. “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*”

Below these three figures of religious authority, Jesus with Moses & Elijah,- on a rocky mountainside, are the 3 disciples, sprawled and sleeping, or just waking up and looking confused, as people often are when woken up suddenly.

Now there are some features of the story which are special to Luke’s account. Of these, two are of special interest to us

1. It is only Luke who makes it clear that Jesus’ purpose in making this mountain climb **was to go to pray**. We are not told the reason why he did so, but it is natural to believe that Jesus chose to climb up this mountain to speak as it were face to face with God, just as Moses did on Mt Sinai. In this action, he was also following the example of Elijah who climbed Mt Horeb, and heard the “still small voice” of God in the sheer silence of the mountainside around

him. This would also explain the presence of these two great figures of Jewish history. Moses & Elijah, seen and recognized by the three apostles, now awake and alert.

Of course Jesus did not need to climb a mountain in order to speak with his Father. Luke tells us that he frequently went off on his own or with his disciples to pray. But the context makes it clear why this mountain climb had a very special purpose. In all three of the Synoptic Gospels, the Transfiguration occurs immediately after a time of significant disclosure- of revelation. At Caesarea Philippi, right in the middle of the Gospel, Jesus has just been recognized by his disciples to be the true Messiah, the Saviour, who would lay down life for the sake of his people, and indeed for the whole world. So here we have a Divine message for all to remember: The voice from the cloud that said, just as that voice had spoken at Jesus' baptism: 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.'

2. And the second important thing about this story, and strangely, it is only Luke who tells us this, is that the three figures of Jesus, Moses & Elijah all appear together "**in glory**".

But what does Luke mean by **glory**? He can only mean one thing. **Glory** means the light and splendour of heaven – the ambience of God in God's majesty where angels and archangels and the saints of God live in joy and peace. When our nearest and dearest, and friends on earth pass away, we pray that *they will rest in peace and rise in glory*. General Booth of the Salvation Army, buried just a few hundred yards away in Abney Park Cemetery taught his officers to say that when they die they are "promoted to glory". So glory is what we may hope to find when we ourselves pass, as we hope to do one day, through the gate of heaven.

In his extraordinary beautiful chapter (I Cor.15) on the meaning of Resurrection, part of which is traditionally read at funerals, Paul teaches his friends at Corinth that it is not only Jesus Christ whose body has undergone a

final transfiguration, but all of us who are believers will go through a similar transfiguration. *“We will be changed...for this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality”.*

Let me finish with these lovely words of a contemporary hymn of praise composed for this day by Brian Wren:

Christ upon the mountain peak
stands alone in glory blazing;
let us, if we dare to speak
with the saints and angels praise him.
Alleluia!

Trembling at his feet, we saw
Moses and Elijah speaking.
All the prophets and the Law
shout through them their joyful greeting.
Alleluia!

Swift the cloud of glory came,
God proclaiming in its thunder
Jesus as his Son by name!
Nations cry aloud in wonder!
Alleluia!

This is God's beloved Son!
Law and prophets fade before him;
first and last and only One,
let creation now adore him!
Alleluia!