

Surprised by the power, love, and beauty of God

A sermon prepared by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon for Sunday 14 February 2021

Refs: 2 Kings 2. 1-12; 2 Corinthians 4. 3-6; Mark 9.2-9

“While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” Matthew 17, v.5

Today our gospel reading tells the story of the Transfiguration. This always reminds me of an occasion some years ago when I was in London, visiting an American friend who was looking after the Anglo-Catholic church of All Saints’ Margaret Street for some months. It happened to be the Feast of the Transfiguration (in August), which All Saints’ did not celebrate, but he took me instead to an even more Anglo-Catholic but less well-known church, St Mary’s Bourne Street. The choir and the organ were in the gallery and the music that floated down was beautiful, but the thing that amazed me was the extraordinary choreography as the three priests repeatedly donned and discarded their birettas. The breadth of the Church of England is truly amazing!

This morning’s readings tell of extraordinary stories which most of us probably struggle to take literally: the ascension of Elijah and the Transfiguration of Christ. The second book of Kings chapter 2 opens as Elijah’s life is evidently coming to an end. Death in those times was seen not as an enemy but as a natural conclusion to life. God was seen as the God of life – what happened beyond the boundary of death remained out of his reach. Elijah’s ascension, ‘in a whirlwind to heaven’, represents a rare breach in this Old Testament wall of death. Faith in resurrection is a much later development. This explains why Elijah was expected to return at the time of the New Testament, since he is seen as having only departed rather than died, so no resurrection was necessary.

The story of the Transfiguration appears in all four Gospels in very similar terms. The very strangeness of the story has convinced many scholars that there must have been a real historical event of this kind. The way that Peter, ever the man of action who must be doing something, blurts out his suggestion of building three shelters – perhaps he had in mind shrines to perpetuate memory of what was happening – adds authenticity to the narrative: who would have made that up? Yet Peter himself was forced to defend its truth, denying in his second letter that it was a cleverly devised myth: ‘We ourselves heard this voice from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain’ (2 Peter 2, 18).

A mountain seems to be the favoured place for an encounter with God. Both Moses and Elijah received experiences of God on mountains – Moses on Mt Sinai and Elijah on Mt Horeb. In part this may reflect the idea that God and heaven were ‘up there’ and climbing a mountain brought someone nearer to God and to heaven. But there is also the idea that by climbing a mountain one leaves behind other people and finds peace and quiet in proximity to the beauty of creation. Some of you may have been watching a splendid series of programmes on BBC4 looking at the seasons of the year on individual Lake District mountains - Helvellyn three weeks ago, then Scafell Pike and now Blencathra this week – which captured this with some fine photography. Such joys are out of reach for us during lockdown, but we can still experience something of the beauty and peace of landscape even in the daily walks many of us take during the present pandemic, if we are fortunate enough to find walks that not too many other people have chosen. As the first signs of spring appear, we are reminded that, as Gerald Manley Hopkins puts it, ‘*The world is charged with the grandeur of God*’ ... ‘*There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.*’

The mountain of the Transfiguration is generally thought to be Mount Hermon, which is remote and inaccessible, snow-capped for much of the year, and would provide an appropriate setting for what

happened. Jesus was transfigured before his disciples – his face shone like the sun, according to Matthew, and his clothes became dazzlingly white, the colour of divine glory. Then a cloud overshadowed them. Travellers have noticed that clouds often form rapidly on the summit of Mount Hermon, and disperse equally quickly - rather like the so-called 'tablecloth' on Cape Town's Table Mountain. All through Jewish history a cloud stood for the glory of God – the cloud in which the Lord descended to give the tablets of the law to Moses, the pillar of cloud which was to lead people on their way in Exodus, and the cloud that filled the house of the Lord at the dedication of Solomon's temple. The descent of the cloud is a way of saying that the Messiah had come, and the Jews would understand its symbolism in this way. But on this occasion the cloud seems to have become luminous, and out of it came God's voice, setting his seal of approval on Jesus.

In different ways the Transfiguration provided assurance for both Jesus and his closest disciples. For Peter, James and John these events were equally critical. They had been shattered by Jesus' statement that he was going to die – it seemed the complete negation of all that they had understood and expected of the Messiah. Things were happening which left them both bewildered and heartbroken. The Transfiguration gave them something to hold on to through thick and thin – even though they could not yet understand: Cross or no Cross, they had heard God's voice acknowledge Jesus as his Son. This made them in a special sense witnesses to the glory of Christ. But before they began to bring God's revelation to the communities in which they lived and travelled, they would need to learn the true meaning of the Messiah through his Cross and Resurrection.

Jesus himself had taken the fateful decision to go to Jerusalem, to face and accept the Cross. On the mountain he seems to receive the assurance he needs that he has made the right decision. This comes first from Moses and Elijah – Moses, the supreme lawgiver of Israel, and Elijah, the first and greatest of the prophets, who brought to people the very voice of God. In them all history rose up and pointed Jesus on his way: the appearance of these two figures on the mountain symbolised their acceptance of Jesus, their recognition that he was the consummation of all that they had dreamed of – of all that the Jews had longed for, hoped for and looked forward to. Then God himself speaks through the cloud, confirming that Jesus was his beloved son and urging that his authority be recognised – 'listen to him'.

In Luke's account of the Transfiguration, he describes Moses and Elijah as speaking with Jesus about his *departure*, which he was going to fulfil at Jerusalem. The word for 'departure' is *exodus*, which we can understand in three ways. It can mean simply 'going away'; it can be a euphemism for death, as when we say 'when I am no longer here'; but Luke probably uses this word because he means that in his death Jesus will enact an event just like the great Exodus from Egypt, only more so. In that first Exodus, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and home to the promised land. In the new Exodus, Jesus will lead *all* God's people out of the slavery of sin and death and home to redemption in the new creation.

The story of the Transfiguration is about being surprised by the power, love and beauty of God. It tells us that we should learn to recognise the same power, love and beauty within Jesus himself, and to listen for it in his voice – not least when he tells us to take up his cross and follow him. In this way there is a direct link between the Transfiguration on the mountain-top and the crucifixion on the hill-top. So we should see the Transfiguration as a prelude to the crucifying of God's love: a prelude that confirmed to Jesus the path that he was destined to follow and showed Peter, James and John, even in their still only partially formed understanding, that they should follow him as Messiah. If we want to find the way to the promised land, the Transfiguration has the same message for us: we too, in *our* partially formed understanding, must listen to Jesus and follow him as Messiah.

Amen.