

## Surprised by God

A sermon prepared by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon for Sunday 8 August 2021

*Refs: Daniel 7. 9-10,13-14; 2 Peter 1. 16-19; Luke 9. 28-36*

As we've followed the Olympic Games in recent days, we have seen many pictures of triumph, as those winning medals fulfil all that they have worked so hard for. Their dreams have come true – figuratively, they have reached the mountain top. Some hope to go on to further victories, but for others this will be supreme point of their careers. Most of us probably remember the film *Chariots of Fire* which tells the true story of two athletes at the Paris Olympics a century ago, in 1920. Harold Abrahams, after a tremendous struggle, achieved the gold medal in the 100 yards. Eric Liddell, the devout Christian who refused to run on a Sunday, switched events and won gold in the 440 yards. After the Games are over, the film shows the athletes returning on the boat train to London and spilling out excitedly into Waterloo station – all except Harold Abrahams, who emerges slowly from the train. He has achieved what he set out to do: he has been up the mountain and is realising that whatever he does he will never stand there again.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration, which has the date of August 6<sup>th</sup> in the church calendar. The story of the Transfiguration appears in all four Gospels in very similar terms – and they all follow it up with the story of a boy who is desperately ill, whom the disciples have been unable to cure. It is as if the two go together: the mountain-top experience and the shrieking, stubborn demon in the child whom Jesus did heal. Whilst some of us may live relatively calm lives, we all experience some personal moments on the mountain top and other moments of blackness and despair. After the mountain-top moments we may feel a sense of anti-climax. Conversely, after when a serious problem is resolved, even though it only means that life returns to its normal course, we may feel a real sense of joy, a new ability to value the ordinary and count our blessings. The more open we are to God, the more we are open not only to our own highs and lows, but also to the joys and pains of the world – aided and abetted in these times by the way in which modern media bring distant events to us as though they were happening next door.

The very strangeness of the Transfiguration story has convinced many scholars that there must have been a real historical event of this kind. Not surprisingly the disciples were overwhelmed by the transfiguration. 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. For me this adds authenticity to the narrative: who would have made it up? Yet in today's Epistle we see Peter himself finding it necessary to defend its truth: 'We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain' (2 Peter 12, 18). Defending the early church against those who derided the extraordinary tales going around about Jesus, Peter insists that the transfiguration was no 'cleverly devised myth' but rather a confirmation of prophecy: the stories of Jesus which reach something of a climax in the revelation of his glory at the transfiguration make it possible to read the entire ancient Jewish scripture knowing the end from the beginning – now they can see with hindsight how everything comes together at the point where the Messiah himself emerges.

Jesus was transfigured before his disciples – his face changed, according to Luke, 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 the 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 for his closest disciples. 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. 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 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'.

Luke 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.

There is one simple but vivid sentence in our Gospel reading: 'but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory'. In life we can all miss so much because our minds are asleep – perhaps because we are blinded by prejudices and ideas too firmly fixed in our minds – we automatically shut the door against any disturbing thought; perhaps through mental lethargy – we may give up the struggle to think things through too easily. But life is full of things designed to waken us, whether deep sorrows, great loves or a sense of real need in the face of seemingly insoluble problems or challenges. Like the disciples, we need to stay awake, physically and mentally.

The Transfiguration is about being surprised by the power, love and beauty of God. It tells us that we should be alert, learning to recognise the same power, love and beauty within Jesus himself, and listening for it in his voice. The Transfiguration 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. We too, in *our* partially formed understanding, must listen to Jesus and seek to follow him as Messiah.