

As a lamp shining in a dark place

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on the Festival of the Transfiguration, 4 August 2019 in St Peter's
Refs: Daniel 7.9-10,13-14; 2 Peter 1,16-19; Luke 9.28-36

Today we're celebrating with Tim Bravington 60 years since his ordination. It seems to me the real question is, how has Tim managed to remain so enthusiastic, joyful and positive for the last 60 years? Similarly, how can we members of the congregation remain enthusiastic, joyful and positive in our faith when, for some of us, it's could be 90 years since our baptism or since our first beginnings of faith?

More immediately, how can we remain positive and hopeful when, once again, we find ourselves in times of turmoil as our country appears to be accelerating towards an outcome widely described by experts as an act of economic self-harm? What is it that can sustain us all, either through the long years of a ministry, a marathon of faith, or in the dark, troubling and bewildering times of life?

I think the Transfiguration is exactly what we need. Let's look more closely at the story and what it's saying to us. Today's Old Testament reading from Daniel gives us intriguing background to the Transfiguration story. The second half of Daniel, after all these wonderful stories of lions' dens and fiery furnaces, is about a time when the Jewish people were at the mercy of powerful and ruthless leaders – leaders who reject their faith in God, and rule without a trace of kindness or mercy. In the midst of this there's this strange picture in our reading of one like a human being, or in traditional translations, one like a son of man, who is lifted up, raised up, into the presence of the Eternal Sovereign Creator God. The powerful and ruthless leaders of the day are rejected, condemned and destroyed. Power, government and dominion over all the world – all nations and all cultures – is given to this one like a son of man, whose reign will last forever.

But Daniel leaves us with a question. Who is this One like a human being? Who is this one like a son of man? So let's go on to our gospel reading about the Transfiguration. This isn't the first extraordinary experience Jesus had, Think of his Baptism when the Holy Spirit alighted on him like a dove and a voice from heaven said "*You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased*", Jesus' commissioning at the very beginning of his ministry. However, this time the context is different. Just before the Transfiguration, Jesus predicted his own suffering and death. The happy early days in Galilee are coming to an end. The Transfiguration prepares Jesus to face the darker part of his life and ministry – his journey to the Cross.

His sufferings and death are not that surprising. This is often, as Jesus himself says, the fate of prophets. With all the divisions and tensions going on around Jesus, the pent-up anger, an atmosphere you could cut with a knife, it's not surprising that it all rebounds onto Jesus himself. But will Jesus be just another prophet who gets killed, another innocent victim, adding to the tally of human evil and violence? Or is there a greater and a deeper meaning?

With all those questions around him, Jesus did what he always did, He goes up a mountain to pray. Taking only Peter, James and John, his closest friends, he went off to spend time seeking the face of God. And what does he find on that mountain? Perhaps the key to it all is the appearance of Moses who is the greatest figure in the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament. The Exodus – Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt – is the foundational story of the Old Testament and the Jewish faith – just as Holy Week is the foundational story for us. On the mountain of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus and talked with him about his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem – referring to his death and resurrection. But the word used for his departure in Greek is Exodus.

The meaning seems clear. Jesus is far more than just another prophet, doomed to die at the hands of a rebellious people. Jesus is the new Moses who has come to lead his people in a new Exodus, leading us out from slavery to sin and death into new life, freedom, resurrection and eternal life.

So Jesus sets out on his dark journey to the Cross but now with a sense of purpose and destiny as he takes on the mantle of this new role – greater even than Moses – leading God’s people out of slavery to sin and death in a new Exodus.

With this knowledge and sense of destiny, Jesus submits to arrest and trial. At the moment when he is most helpless – alone, in chains and with breath taking audacity, he takes on himself the prophecy of Daniel we hear in our Gospel. When he’s asked, *“Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”*, he replies *“I am, and you will see the Son of Man, sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”* It’s an unmistakable reference to the words of our passage from Daniel, clearly identifying himself with the one like a son of man who is given dominion, glory and kingship over all nations and cultures forever.

Let no one say that Jesus was just a good teacher, and that the church has come up with all these whacky ideas about him. This is on the lips of Jesus himself, in our earliest account of the life of Jesus, St Mark’s gospel. And yes – it’s political. What does this mean? For Christians it means Jesus is our King – king above all earthly governments and rulers. And we are called to live in the world as his subjects, under his lordship. How do we do that? For those of us fortunate to live in a place where we have democracy and free speech, I believe it means that we are called to pray, work, campaign and vote for Christ-like government in our world and in our country.

Of course it’s not always that easy. Tim [Bravington] knows all about this, having ministered in South Africa for so many years under an apartheid government, as part of an Anglican church that never gave in to apartheid and always stood up for the ideal of a South African Christlike society.

In a different way, this message, that the rule of Christ is over and above all earthly government, is still relevant today. I’ve never preached a party-political sermon and never will. I’ve never preached for or against Brexit, and never will. We’re all entitled to our own individual opinions on these things. But I will preach on behalf of those Welsh farmers wondering who will be buying their lamb raised on Welsh hills in the future. And I will preach on behalf of those people of Ellesmere whose livelihoods and community are dependent on a Vauxhall car plant with a future hanging in the balance.

I believe the call to pray, work and campaign for Christ-like government in our country and our world still applies today. It’s something we need to work out what it means for ourselves.

But what about the dark times, especially for those who do not have the good fortune to live in a peaceful democracy? What about the dark times and places when we don’t see Christ-like government in our world, and nothing seems to change? What about the years Tim [Bravington] saw in South Africa when apartheid seemed unassailable and change seemed impossible?

Let’s go back to the Transfiguration story and remember - this was not just for Jesus, it was for us too. There were three people with Jesus on that mountain – Peter, James and John. It must have been quite scary when, *“A cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.”* It got even worse when a voice came from the cloud. Bear in mind there were only three of them there to hear it. So when the voice said: *“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”* they must have been quaking in their boots! *“Yes, we’ll listen!”*

How important it was for Peter, James and John to listen attentively to the message of Jesus, so they could convey it truthfully to the whole world. Today’s epistle reading was written many years later. Here we see the message of the Transfiguration applied to the church in dark times, when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians and the rule of Christ seemed far away. Peter reminds his readers of what he saw and says that the Transfiguration confirms all the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus, assuring them that the real king, the eternal king, is Jesus and that these brutal earthly rulers will soon pass away. He encourages them to let this

hope be for them, in his words, ***“a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”***

It's not enough to hear this in sermons and to believe it in our minds. We need it to fire our hearts so it's important in our worship to celebrate the lordship and the eternal kingship of Jesus. It's important that we encourage each other in this faith and hope, just as those amongst whom Tim ministered for all those years under an apartheid government, will have encouraged each other with that characteristic passionate, gutsy African faith through long dark years.

So today, as we celebrate the Transfiguration, and as we proclaim the lordship and the eternal kingship of Christ, I believe we are called both to pray, work and campaign for Christ-like government in our world, and in times of turmoil and anxiety, to encourage each other in a passionate, gutsy faith in Jesus our true and eternal Lord and King, who is our unshakeable Rock, forever.

Amen