

SERMON – 27 FEBRUARY 2022 - 2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2, Luke 9.28-43



The Transfiguration, Raphael, c 1520

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Sunday next before Lent brings us the story of the Transfiguration. Since Easter is so late this year, and therefore Ash Wednesday is late too - it's a few weeks since we had lots of lovely light in our Candlemas service. We ended that service blowing out our candles, turning from the light of Christmas towards the effort of Lent, the darkness of Holy Week and the light of Easter.

Today, once again, on the Sunday next before Lent we can have a vision of glory, before we head down the mountain – and yet this year, this week, there seems to be precious little glory around. The images from Ukraine – sheltering in the metro, tanks running over cars, the sound of bombs – and a world which stands to one side. I don't pretend to understand the politics, but it is obvious that when European leaders meet, our country is no longer part of the discussions. It is also obvious that we have been a welcoming haven for Russian cash, Russian oligarchs – and that the evil which feeds every war, every conflict, is an evil just as powerful as it ever was, just as present as it ever was.

Running alongside war and rumours of war, I have friends who work in higher education, friends who have been on strike this week because their pensions will be decimated. I have a doctor daughter and her friends who are so tired of working in an under-funded under-resourced NHS that they are despairing it will ever get better. I have teacher friends who are struggling to be enthusiastic about going back to work after half term. So, let's put it to one side and go up a mountain. I may be a Fenman at heart, but I do recognise the joy of lifting up mine eyes to the hills.



“Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.” Did they walk up together as four friends – or did Jesus stride on ahead leaving the others to bring up the rear. I wonder if Peter and John and James were glad to go with him – let’s assume they were – though I wonder if they got half way up the mountain and wished he’d chosen three other disciples to go with him.

They are going to pray – because communication with God is important. Even Jesus who, after all, is God, needs to go, to get away from the crowds, to spend time in prayer. We would be better people, we would have a stronger church, if we were better at prayer – it is our communication with God, and it isn’t easy. There are plenty of things which stop me praying, and I need to put more effort in. So, if you struggle, you are not alone.

Jesus prays. Here is an opportunity for the disciples to share a wonderful prayer moment – and they are sleepy. I do find that so encouraging – Peter, James and John, three of Jesus’ closest disciples – and they almost sleep through an opportunity to pray with Him. On those occasions when I’m sitting in church or in my study trying to find the words to say, trying to keep my mind concentrating on the prayers I know I should be saying, I feel at one with them.



*The Transfiguration mosaic in Daphni Monastery,
near Constantinople*

Jesus prays. And prayer is deep. While praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Peter, James and John see two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus. In stained glass windows Moses is usually holding the tablets of the law, and Elijah looks like a prophet – somehow the disciples knew who it was who Jesus was with. They are two major figures of their faith – they knew the Law, they knew that Moses had bought their people to the Promised Land. They knew the words of the prophet, they knew that Elijah had bought the Word of God to their people. Who knows what they thought about seeing Jesus in the company of these two men. Was it a

surprise, or had they realised by this stage that Jesus is the Messiah so of course he is with Moses and Elijah.



Peter tries to capture the moment, and keep Moses and Elijah there. This is a special moment, an incredible vision, can we hold the moment? No – we can't. We go from glory into a cloud. To me, with half a geography degree, I think about the weather. Do you imagine a dark cloud, sweeping in, obscuring the sun – that sort of cloud with the hail inside, which catches you when you're out walking in the middle of the Peaks, miles from the car? Perhaps it is the black cloud with a rainbow striking through – that might be nearer the mark for the Transfiguration.

But the cloud is also the place where God is. Psalm 97:2 “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.” The cloud comes in and overshadows them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. If we'd used today's psalm, Psalm 99 – “the Lord is King, let the peoples tremble”. Most of us, thankfully, don't know the sort of fear that leads us to tremble – but I can think of a few occasions, usually in a hospital A&E in the company of police officers and medical staff, when a families' fear and grief manifested itself physically, and all you could do was hold their hands and pray.



We don't do fear, terror – certainly not in church. When you get your new church magazine, you will see photos of amazing colour altars discovered up on Hadrian's Wall. The Great North Museum have used the power of light to colour their altars, bringing them to life in an amazing way. Absolutely beautiful – but of course some of these altars would have been coloured by blood. Up on the Wall can see the remains of the temple of Mithras, imagine being one of those who worshipped him, the Roman military god in the temple. The darkness, the sacrifice, the blood. Imagine being one of those who entered the Jewish Temple at Candlemas, holding the pair of turtle doves or two young

pigeons, watching as the priest took his knife, or was it a cleaver, and decapitated said birds as a sacrifice. Imagine the blood of the sacrificial lamb, the white vestments covered in blood – enough to frighten anyone.



In days when our medieval churches were decorated with wall paintings, they were often calculated to scare. The church at Hissett in Suffolk has a fourteenth century wall painting showing the seven deadly sins and the devil stoking the furnace. On Wednesday we will offer Ashing – and I will use the words Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from your sin and be faithful to Christ. Despite Christ’s love and my positive relationship with him, I find that frightening.

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” God points to Jesus, Jesus is God in human form, God come to earth. His voice was heard at Jesus’ baptism, at the start of his ministry, He speaks again now. In, what a year or so, as Jesus hangs on the cross, God keeps silent – but darkness descends, the curtain in the temple is torn in two, the Holy of Holies is open. As Jesus rises again, there is an earthquake – everything is shaken – again, something I’ve never experienced, but I can imagine it.



St Peter and St Paul, Mansfield

Then “Jesus was found alone.” We are back to normal, if you can describe being in the presence of Jesus as normal.

You can imagine Peter, James and John trying to make sense of it all. No wonder “they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.” How do you get your head round what you have seen on the mountain, how do you put into words a vision of Moses, Elijah and Jesus, how do you speak about Jesus at prayer and what it meant to be there?

Fortunately, as time went on, as they witnessed Jesus’ death and resurrection, as the Holy Spirit came down upon them – the words came. They were able to explain what it meant, how it felt, to describe who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him.



St Peter and St Paul, Mansfield

For us - like those disciples there are times to keep silent as we stand in the presence of God, and there is a time to speak. We have witnessed Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit is at work in our church and our lives. We are here to show his love, and we have so many opportunities to do just that. Let’s use this Lent to draw closer to God, to be faithful in love and prayer and service, to find the strength to move on, to move on together, to learn from Christ how to use the opportunities he gives us, to his praise and glory. Amen.

Peter Barham
25 February 2022