

## Sermon for the Sunday next before Lent (11<sup>th</sup> February 2018)

Readings:

2 Kings 2:1-12  
2 Corinthians 4:3-6  
Mark 9:2-9

### The Transfiguration

Now, that's a very strange story that I read just now. Those of us who know the stories of Jesus well may be so familiar with it we don't think about it as strange, but what happened was very unusual. So unusual that the disciples, we are told, were terrified! So terrified, so frightened, that Peter, who could usually be relied on to speak out, didn't know what to say!

If you have one of the church Bibles you may like to have it open at that Gospel reading – Mark 9:2-9 on page 42 of the New Testament section. What Mark tells us in the story is that Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain, and that there he is transfigured.

Being transfigured isn't something we regularly experience or see – we might well wonder what the word means. But Mark does explain that Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, so much so that no one on earth could have bleached them that much. It's a way of saying, of giving us a picture, that Jesus suddenly had all the radiance, the light, the glory, that he has, or in our imagination we might think of him as having, as Son of God in heaven.

And then, of course, those great figures from the Old Testament scriptures, Elijah and Moses, appear, talking with Jesus. We read one of the stories of Elijah for our Old Testament reading.

All so unexpected and strange – it's no wonder the disciples were frightened. But Peter does at least realise that it is something good and says so – and he seems to want to make it permanent by offering to make what he calls "dwellings" for Jesus, Elijah and Moses.

Mark comments that Peter really didn't know what to say. It was obviously an inappropriate remark. As we see just after, it is all far from permanent and in a few moments Elijah and Moses have disappeared, and Jesus is there alone with the disciples.

But not before something else very important happens. A cloud comes and overshadows them. Clouds were another sign in the Old Testament of the presence and glory of God – think of the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness in Moses' day. And from the cloud there comes a voice – "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!"

And then – it's all over. Elijah and Moses are gone. Jesus is there as he always had been – no dazzling white clothes. What was the point of it all? Why did it happen?

We need to understand where this comes in the Gospel story – and how it fits in with the whole ministry of Jesus. One of the problems we have because we read just short passages

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from the Bible in our Services is that we learn about the individual stories or bits of teaching but we don't necessarily see where each fits into the whole picture.

This event comes at what is really a turning point in the whole Gospel story. Up to this point Mark has been telling us about Jesus being baptised, about him gathering his band of disciples and about him going around teaching and working miracles. People have been forming various opinions about him. But, just before our story starts, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" That's just before our reading, in Mark chapter 8 verse 29 – if you have the Bible open you can see it, on the same page.

Jesus is asking them, "You've heard all the teaching, you've seen all the miracles, what do you think about me?" And Peter comes out with the answer – hopefully speaking for them all – "You are the Messiah."<sup>1</sup>

There you have it. But the trouble was – and Jesus knew this – the people's perception of the Messiah, which, after all, the disciples would share, was of a soldier-king who would establish Israel as a kingdom like it had been under King David and King Solomon, leading a revolution to throw off the Roman occupying forces on the way. It wasn't just that that was scarcely realistic bearing in mind the enormous power of Rome – it just wasn't in God's plan at all.

Jesus knew that. He knew that, rather than reign like King David over his people, the Messiah would be rejected by them, and rather than overthrowing the Romans, he would be executed by them. The disciples had to be forewarned about this, and from that moment on Jesus' teaching contained references to his coming suffering and death. That's one reason why it was a turning point in Jesus' ministry. But it was going to be difficult for the disciples to accept. Indeed, no sooner had Peter uttered the words, "You are the Messiah", but Jesus began to teach them about his forthcoming death – and Peter immediately objected. Again, if you have the Bible open you can see all that in chapter 8 verses 31-33.

The disciples needed something more to help them understand what seemed to them to be exactly the opposite of what they had been expecting of the Messiah. Hence this event of the transfiguration which took place, Mark tells us, just six days afterwards. There, on the mountain, they saw Jesus in glory, as the Son of God. There they saw and heard him being affirmed by those great characters of the scriptures, Elijah and Moses. And, perhaps most important of all, they heard the voice of God speaking from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!"

God says, this is my Son, this is the Messiah – listen to what he says – not to your own prejudices and preconceptions. Don't listen to the popular view – listen to Jesus! That was the message of the transfiguration for the disciples – though we know that it didn't really sink in, and they were still baffled and perplexed whenever Jesus tried to teach them about the suffering and death he was due to undergo. But at least, after the resurrection, the idea did gel!

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8:29b

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And those words, “Listen to him,” are for us as well. It’s not always easy for us to understand Jesus’ suffering and death – but we do have Jesus’ own words to assure us that in them lies our forgiveness and our eternal life – that through them we can know him and know God our Father. And, of course, we don’t just have the transfiguration but also the resurrection to assure us that Jesus is Lord, and we can trust him where understanding falls short. Listen to Jesus – and trust, even if we don’t fully understand.

And then, of course, we sometimes get an experience of the presence or the closeness or the glory of God ourselves. They are often referred to as “mountain-top” experiences – reflecting the transfiguration story we’ve just been thinking about. Not all of us get them. It’s no reflection on you if you can’t remember ever having one; they are given by God and are not the privilege of those who are specially “good” or “spiritual”. But for those who do have them they are a help to know and trust God – again, even if we don’t always understand. And, like the transfiguration, they are often brief and pass quickly. We can’t hang on to them, and the memory of them may fade with time.

Listen – and trust Jesus, even if you don’t fully understand. If you do listen, you may well find that understanding comes – and with it a better, deeper knowledge of Jesus. You may not see his glory like the disciples did, but it will, as Paul says in our New Testament lesson from 2 Corinthians, shine in your hearts. You’ll find Paul’s words quoted on the back of Open Door. If the light shines in your hearts you will know something of the glory of God even if you can’t see it – and maybe a little of it will be apparent to those you meet!