

**Exodus 34: 29 – end; 2 Corinthians 3**

**This feast of the Transfiguration**, always commemorated on 6 August, which happens to be a Sunday this year, has been very neglected in the past by Anglicans. The Book of Common Prayer, which we are using this evening, includes the Transfiguration in the Calendar at the front, but has no collect or readings in the main part of the book. The more recent Common Worship book does provide a collect and readings, but on the whole this feast is not much regarded in what we might call the Western Church, Anglican and Roman Catholic, although the great east window in St. Mary's Church in Kidwelly, where I used to be Vicar, has a beautiful depiction of the event.

On the other hand the Orthodox Church of the East has a tremendous regard for the Transfiguration, which is one of the twelve Great Feasts of the year. In Orthodoxy there is a marvellous sense of the divine glory of the incarnate Christ, above all in the Resurrection, but also in the Transfiguration, when signs of what is known as shekinah, the light of God's presence, radiated through Jesus's body, just as the face of Moses shone with light when he spoke with God, as we heard in both readings tonight (Exodus, chapter 34, verses 29- 35 and 2 Corinthians, chapter 3).

So what happened. We are told by three evangelists - Mark, Matthew, and Luke – that while Jesus was praying on the holy mountain he was transfigured in the presence of his three specially chosen apostles – Peter, James, and John. Jesus's whole personality appeared to be suffused with celestial majesty, and his clothes shone with strange glory. The law-giver Moses and the prophet Elijah talked with him about his impending departure from this world. And moreover a voice out of the cloud which overshadowed them declared 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him'.

The Transfiguration took place at a turning point in Jesus's ministry. So far he had attracted widespread attention. His influence was felt throughout Galilee, where great crowds listened eagerly to his teaching. Opposition had appeared, but it seemed powerless against one who held so masterful an influence over the great mass of the people and who excited the passionate devotion of those who were his companions. Yet Jesus himself was preparing for an entire change in people's attitude to his mission, and he was conscious of an approaching conflict which must end in his death. It was at this moment that the Transfiguration took place, as if marking the consummation of his public ministry.

Jesus could at this point – in the full success of his ministry – have passed to heaven in glory and triumph, and we would never have heard of him. But that was not the plan of God. Jesus returned to the world beneath the mountain and he died in the shame of the cross. But after that he attained the glory of Easter and the Resurrection. In the Resurrection the glory of the Transfiguration was regained, and this time not only for himself and his chosen three but for all his true disciples.

For Peter, James, and John the Transfiguration was a terrifying and confused experience of the living God. They fell on their faces in awe, and then they had to come down from the holy mountain, back from this meeting with God, to the world below.

And Jesus had scarcely left the scene of this glory when he was confronted by an epileptic boy and his father. That was certainly down to earth. Each day is made up of light and dark. Each life is made up of joy and sorrow. We have to remember what we learned in joy for when sorrow comes, and our times of happiness can be deepened and purified by a remembrance of sorrow. We cannot live all our lives in spiritual joy and bliss, any more than could the disciples stay for ever on the holy mountain. The times of such joy pass, but the inward power is there in us, with fortifying grace to help us when we pass through the waters of affliction and the valley of the shadow of death. And we know that the faint joy and glory which we experience occasionally in this life – those moments when we know that God is real – are but the faintest glimmers of the radiance of joy which shall be ours in the place which our Father has prepared for us, when we shall be changed from glory into glory.

The Christian life has been likened to a door hanging on two hinges. One hinge represents prayer and worship – spiritual things, holiness. The other hinge represents service to those around us – good works, caring. When both hinges are in working order the door works and leads us to full service of God. But if one hinge breaks the door sags and the whole thing loses its balance. And we live in a world where for many people there is no balance because the spiritual hinge is broken for them.

We cannot read many of the sayings of Jesus without seeing that love must be translated into action and care. But we need spiritual things as well. It is good to give time to prayer, worship, sacraments, and Bible reading for their spiritual content. Some people have the great blessing of an immediate experience of the presence of God quite often; others, including me, do not often have any sense of God's nearness. But just occasionally, at least speaking for myself, we are taken out of ourselves, perhaps through music or poetry or the beauty of nature, or perhaps in what we might call a positive silence. We can listen. God said to Peter, James, and John on the holy mountain 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased: listen to him'. Listen to him. When Peter, James, and John looked up Moses and Elijah had disappeared. There was only Jesus. But he is enough.

Listen to him, for he is the word of God made flesh. There's so much we don't understand, so many things to be worried about in the world. Today, and I mean today, 6 August 2023, we might worry especially about the menace of nuclear warfare, as we recall what happened at Hiroshima 78 years ago. We can give up hope for ourselves and our children and grandchildren. Or we can think of the Transfiguration, of Jesus revealed in glory as the Son of God, he to whom the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah, looked forward, Jesus whose face shone dazzling as light.

Treasure every moment of spiritual ecstasy, and keep every experience of the divine in your heart, to inspire and strengthen you in times of distress and doubt. One can never tell when a sense of the divine reality will come to us - one distinguished churchman had his strongest sense of God outside a chip-shop in down-town Liverpool - but perhaps we are more likely to be open to God in a holy place, like this great church, as we sense the very special atmosphere which centuries of prayer can produce, especially with wonderful music. Please God that we can say of our worship here, as Peter said on the holy mountain '**It is well that we are here**'. 'It is good for us to be here'. Try not to say to Jesus 'Listen, Lord, for your servant is speaking', but rather be quiet and say 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'. And relax, and leave the rest to him.

We all need sometimes to experience the Transfiguration, holiness on the holy mountain, and then we need Jesus to be with us when we return to the world, as it were, for our everyday lives in the sometimes difficult, troublesome, and sometimes baffling and frightening world of 2023.

In the words of a hymn by Dean Armitage Robinson in which we imagine that we are on the holy mountain with Jesus:

'Tis good, Lord, to be here!  
Yet, we may not remain;  
But since thou bidst us leave the mount  
Come with us to the plain.

William Price