

Sermon 4th August 2017

Luke 9: 28-36 – The Transfiguration – Discipleship: Shorthand.

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I feel conscience-bound to inform you that it was my great privilege to preach my first ever sermon on this passage 5 years ago – the Transfiguration in Luke. I won't repeat the word I used when I first read the text. Unfortunately, as I was preaching – fresh-faced, grateful of my robes to hide my knocking knees, I saw the worst thing... a head slowly drop into slumber (talk about dispiriting)! Accordingly, I solemnly promise that I confined that sermon to the bin – and anyone who essays a snore had better be on heavy medication or imitating Peter – as I'm assured the gentleman in question was!

Don't let that put you off though – because what we have here is one of the most intriguing stories about Jesus. It contains elements that read like a fantasy novel - asking us to suspend our disbelief and look at what the Transfiguration might mean to us today.

What seems highly unusual – to say the least – in the transformation of the face, in the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the unique attempt to understand from Peter, contains food for deep thought!

Take the setting. Peter, James, John and Jesus had toiled uphill in the middle of the day, where the sun was at it's hottest. Throwing themselves down for a break to contemplate, tempted by the welcome prospect of contemplating the back of their eyelids as the landscape of shrubs, boulders, trees and rock, brought into sharp relief by the sun, faded away. I don't know about you but for me, it is very easy sometimes to identify with the weary disciples – and long for a nap of some kind. If that is our context, then welcome weary travellers!

The second is prayer. While the disciples took five, Jesus, as he would do again in the garden of Gethsemane, withdraws a little to pray. It is with Jesus at prayer that the Transfiguration occurs. In my mind's eye, the Lord begins slowly to radiate a rippling, dynamic light, like the sparkle that dances on a wave. As Jesus draws closer to God, remembers God, he begins to be transformed. Prayer, in itself, is the place of refuge and transformation – and often where our most irrepressible senses of God's presence occur. I also think it is notable that the Transfiguration takes place in a deserted place – I try to heed this. Prayer when all seems desolate or ordinary, is some of the hardest prayer – but it is a discipline that leads to experiences like that of our Lord and his disciples.

The third is the Transfiguration itself. It is by this event that the disciples were prompted back to wakefulness. We read that it was a sense of light that they experienced – not the light that had illuminated the hillside, giving shape and form to their surroundings, but instead something described by Luke as 'glory'. This light was like the heart of the sun. It confused and disorientated them – leading Peter to make the remark he did. I don't blame him. Peter's comment was the best he could come up with when roused from sleep to near blindness! It was not until years later, writing the letter of Peter, that he understands the significance of that moment as a lamp shining in a dark place. That the Lord could not be contained by things of human origin. To understand our experiences in a transformative light – that is a lesson in itself – but hopefully one to take comfort from!

This light did not emanate from a usual source, but seemed to come from the person of Jesus instead. The glory of the Lord truly did shine around – and threw into relief two additional figures to the company on that lonely hillside. For our disciples, the scene is incomprehensible. They had been asked to come here with Jesus. Their experience of Jesus and their upbringing would have made

them realize that something significant was occurring. But why? What did it mean? How? Luke records how the two figures of Elijah, Moses and a voice – not of Jesus, transfigured in light, revealed the truth to them and to us.

From the overshadowing cloud comes the voice – ‘this is my Son. Listen to him’. I tell you that if I hadn’t been listening up until that point, I would have been then! Listen to him. As Moses and Elijah, the prophet and the lawgiver, the ultimate representatives of Israel’s covenant with God, speak, point to Jesus and fade from sight. I imagine that Jesus, knowing the beginning of his road to Gethsemane, took comfort from their endorsement of him. But in this context, it is significant. These two figures have spoken, pointed to Jesus, and faded, while the command of God is to listen to his Son. And Jesus, just for a moment, is resplendent in a light from which comes love, life, and truth.

After all of this, it is no wonder that Luke remarks that the disciples, though heavy with sleep, had stayed awake to witness something that was to sustain them years later. The disciple’s initial weariness, Jesus’ thoroughly transfiguring experience of prayer, and the command to listen – far from being an untenable tale from an out-dated book – can be an encouragement to us this morning as an experience that can continue to transform our lives and our world in the life, love and truth offered by Jesus.

To conclude (give anyone asleep a nudge!), the lesson of The Transfiguration’s in a nutshell? I can’t express it better than the original concluding words of the well-known hymn *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*:

‘All laud we would render; O help us to see, ’Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee, And so let Thy glory, Almighty, impart, Through Christ in His story, Thy Christ to the heart.’

Amen.