

## The Transfiguration

MATTHEW 17:1-9

Romans 8:18-25

Ps 136:1-9, 23-26

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May our feet walk in your way Lord, may our hands do your work Lord, may our minds think of you Lord, may our hearts be filled with your love Lord and may our mouths speak your words Lord. Amen

The theme for this morning's sermon is the Transfiguration. Literally the word transfiguration means 'a great change in form or appearance'. It is not something we experience on a daily basis. It may be that when someone has had a new hairstyle, lost or gained weight, or we see them in a different context to usual; for example dressed rather than in gym clothes, or maybe not in the uniform they wear for work, that we would say 'Oh I didn't recognise you'. Sometimes it is a change for the better and sometimes not. Our Gospel reading talks of Jesus being revealed to his three closest disciples in his full glory, glory that is beyond the understanding of mere mortals. If I try to think of God and all He is capable of it makes my brain hurt. I come back to the beginning of John's Gospel to gain some sort of perspective, 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory, Glory as of the only begotten Son of God the Father, full of grace and truth'.

I want to start by looking briefly at the reading from Romans where Paul is telling people that the present time is marked by suffering. Where there are people there is always suffering of some sort, suffering that is caused by humans or natural disaster (which may well be brought on by human interference). Paul is looking forward to a time when there will be glory as God fulfils His promises to His believers. We live in a world where we hear about suffering on a daily basis, currently we are so aware of those affected, and those helping in Turkey and Syria. There are wars that are affecting the lives of so many people; a cost of living crisis that is causing people to consider whether they can afford to heat their homes in cold weather or what food they can buy; nurses, teachers, train drivers, ambulance workers and others who feel the only way to get their voice heard is to strike and cause disruption to yet more people; environmental issues which make us consider how to live more sustainably. We do live in difficult times, but Paul says we have something to

look forward to. The future, for those who believe in Jesus as God's Son, will be marked by glory as God fulfils all His promises to us. For Christians being filled with the Holy Spirit is not only Salvation now, but also a pledge of a future inheritance as children of God. So if we live in faith and keep our eyes on the future promised glory, then we can cope with what we have to endure now with perseverance and hope. The time for our change will come, but maybe not when we expect it.

Let's turn back to our Gospel reading now. It is a few days after Peter has recognised that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and since then Jesus has been teaching the disciples that He is going to suffer and die. The disciples are struggling enough with this idea, but Jesus has also told them that to follow Him fully they too have to be prepared to suffer. Being a disciple brings complications to life.

Peter, James and John are Jesus' closest disciples and Luke's Gospel adds that they went up the mountain to pray. This was characteristic of Jesus, to move away from the crowd when He wanted time alone with God. There is no preamble to the Transfiguration. Suddenly 'His face shone like the sun and His clothes became as white as the light'. At the same time Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. Moses is a very important prophet for both Jews and Christians. He lived about 1350 years before Jesus and is the prophet who led the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and gave them the 10 Commandments. These are the laws that form the foundation of our legal code and underpin the Golden Rule for Christian life, to treat others the way that you would like to be treated. Elijah lived 500 years later and is the prophet who had the contest with the priests of Baal on Mt Horeb and heard God in the still small voice of calm. Each year at the Passover a place is set at the Seder Table for Elijah in the hope that he will return. Together they represent the old covenant and the promise of salvation. That is the Old Testament history of the Hebrew people and the change that Jesus is going to bring about; the direct relationship with God and the salvation attainable through Jesus' death and resurrection (and our faith).

Peter, James and John would have been so familiar with the accounts of Moses and Elijah from the Hebrew Scriptures and seeing them would have been an experience almost beyond words. However, they do not fully grasp the

significance of this experience. Peter wants to build shelters for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. This may have been linked to the practise of building shelters and sleeping outdoors during the Feast of Tabernacles which is a time to celebrate the fruits of the harvest, and to rejoice, giving thanks for all God has given, and give back to God in return, or it may just have been wanting a new tent where God could communicate with his people and a way of prolonging the experience.

The whole experience, however, was fleeting as whilst Peter was still speaking a bright cloud covered them and a voice spoke from within the cloud. 'This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him'. These are the same words that were heard at Jesus' baptism and are an affirmation of who Jesus is. The cloud is a metaphor for God. It was a cloud that led the Hebrews through the Red Sea. It was a cloud that cloaked the mountain when Moses received the Ten Commandments. It is a cloud that will receive Jesus from sight at his ascension.

The instant response of the disciples is to fall to the ground and hide their faces. The text says that they were terrified and who wouldn't be? It was believed that you needed to hide your face from seeing God as the sight would be too much for a human to cope with. When Moses came down the mountain having spoken with God and received the 10 Commandments his face was so radiant that no one could look at him and he had to wear a veil. For the disciples it might well have been a natural human reaction of fear, as speaking clouds are not the norm. They had just seen Moses and Elijah and before that Jesus had been revealed in His full glory. It could be that 'terrified' in this context means total awe and respect in the presence and majesty of God. We bow our heads out of respect at times, why wouldn't the disciples show the deepest respect they could, having just seen Jesus transfigured and having heard the voice of God? It would be natural to humble themselves in His presence and fall to the ground.

Jesus instantly reassures them and tells them not to be afraid and the moment is gone, as, when they look up there is only Jesus there. The reassurance might also be a request for them not to be afraid for Jesus with what is about to happen to Him. Our passage ends with a phrase that Jesus often used: to not tell anyone else about what had just happened, except this time he adds 'until

the Son of Man has been raised from the dead'. He is saying quite clearly what will happen very soon, and once again it is something that the disciples do not fully understand as yet; it is easier for us as we know what Jesus is going to go through and how He will rise from the dead.

How would we react if we were to see Jesus in His full glory? As I said at the beginning, it makes my brain hurt to try to understand the full glory of God but from the account of the Transfiguration I feel affirmed in my faith in Jesus; I feel blessed that I have the opportunity to walk alongside Him in my daily life and empowered to try to do his work in the community. Two weeks ago John White spoke about Christians needing to be the salt and light doing Jesus' work in the world, I want to be that salt and light, do you?

In this year when we are thinking about renewal in and through our church let us pray for our personal transfiguration, how can we reflect God's glory in the world?