

SERMON 11 FEBRUARY 2018 TRANSFIGURATION

Listening to the reading about the Transfiguration, we hear words that are attempting to describe mystery and wonder. Words can only circle around the centre. Attempting to comment on them is just as self-defeating. Using our rational thinking is important, but it cannot always get us to the heart of things, especially when we are talking about matters of faith. So this morning, what I am going to try and do is give the story some context, make a few comments, but then, I hope, to give the heart of this story some space.

Today we are standing on a bridge. The bridge is built on today's story of Jesus transfigured in light. The bridge connects us in one direction with the season of Epiphany. Epiphany means revelation, and in the last few weeks we have had numerous different stories about how God reveals Godself in Christ: in Jesus' birth, with Simeon and Anna, the wise men; through John the Baptist and Jesus' own baptism, then the calling of Philip and Nathaniel who are pointed towards Jesus who knows about them, and on to people hearing Jesus' authority as he taught, and seeing his power being recognised by the man with the evil spirit. All that forms the basis for our own understanding of God's revelation to us of who Jesus is and what his power and authority means for us today.

Now we are on a bridge today before we move forward and cross over into the journey through Lent that will bring us to Jerusalem, to Gethsemane, Golgotha and the garden tomb; to suffering, mockery, rejection, pain, death and resurrection. Surely we have needed to take in

the message of Epiphany, of God's power of healing and compassion coming alongside humanity, if we are to deal with what lies ahead!

But today is more than just a bridge. Today leads us to an extraordinary place, a great Epiphany on the mountain of the Transfiguration. The lectionary gives us this story in this place on our journey with Jesus for good reason, and we need this moment, even though we struggle to understand it. We need this story because it leads us to a place of wonder. In such a place we are drawn out of our normal rational mindset. We become more aware of the vertical dimension – that pull towards the infinite that is planted in our hearts but which is often overwhelmed by the pressures of daily life. We all have this vertical dimension that points us upward, as well as the horizontal that grounds us in our own daily living and humanness. Surely the cross is at the intersection of this. These two dimensions, the vertical and the horizontal, are well recognised. Augustine, who spent time looking into himself and what made him tick, found “not only his own brokenness but also intimations of perfection, sensations of transcendence, emotions and thoughts that extend beyond the finite into another realm.” (That's a quote from David Brooks)

We must always hold this tension between perfection that we know is God alone, and our own imperfection. As Peter, James and John stumbled into the vision of light that overwhelmed them as saw Jesus transfigured, and Moses and Elijah with him, they were aware of perfection and purity. Of course they wanted to hold onto the moment. Of course, they could not. For ourselves, we can only hold the tension between moments of perfection we sense, and our imperfection, because what shines on us is the light of love.

Perfection, seen like this, indicates purity. We reach towards it. But there is also a warning for us all, with our broken nature and the shadowed world that we are part of - those vertical and horizontal parts of our lives. I received an email this week with the monthly reflection from a friend in Edinburgh. He called it "The Myth of Purity". He quotes a Pakistani writer, Mohsin Habid, who points to the far-right and extreme movements around the world that would assert racial or religious purity. Against that, Habid writes of how every single person is a genetic mix. He suggests that in so many of the huge challenges that face the world, we need new approaches that cross cultures and countries and, in doing so, generate creativity. He suggests that our future hope comes from what he calls "mongrelisation".

We have to understand what we mean by purity and perfection. The call towards purity is a yearning towards God. It shows us the creativity that is born out of love for one another, for the creation and the wellbeing of all. Purity, as we see it lived out in Jesus, is shown as love with dirty hands. The disciples discovered that immediately after their mountain top experience, when they came down into the mess of life.

Epiphany, God giving us some revelation of Godself: transfiguration, purity. The Transfiguration was an experience of wonder that is, especially today, placed before us. This wonder, as Mark tells it, is couched as a secret that should not be told until after the resurrection and would not be understood until then. All this is very important for our lives. It cannot be explained in words and I will not attempt any further to do so. I hope I have just given it some context. For us, now, as we stand on this bridge that leads us down into our Lenten journey, let us turn our hearts towards the mystery and wonder. Let us look towards the light

that reaches out towards each one of us when we turn down the volume of our rational inner chatter and open ourselves to God who addresses us each as the loved individual we are.

I invite you, if you like, to look at the painting of the Transfiguration scene on the back of your order of service, or just to imagine, as we listen again to the music “Be still..”.

Here is Malcolm Guite’s sonnet for the Transfiguration, as on you cover page:

For that one moment, ‘in and out of time’,
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.