

Sermon for the Sunday Next Before Lent (Transfiguration) 2023

By Jonathan Poston

I don't watch much TV these days.

But I do end up watching endless YouTube videos of people giving their opinion and having conversations, talking about news, the trends of our culture, spirituality and symbolism, and Christianity both orthodox and the more exploratory.

There's a lot of people out there with a lot of opinions. And sometimes I have to turn them off and just put on a music video to stop the conversations going round and round in my head.

The world is full of explanations. Many that are interesting and many that are ridiculous. So it was somewhat refreshing to read the readings for church this morning, and to be invited to encounter the Transfiguration. No explanations, no teaching and parables but this huge visual encounter that the disciples experienced.

Before any of the events of Jerusalem and the crucifixion and Golgotha, the disciples have this amazing revelatory encounter where Jesus revealed to them the reality of who he was. This wasn't some hippy rabbi telling everyone just to be nice to each other. Jesus was and is a divine being, and if you don't quite believe in divine beings I suggest you keep a part of your mind open to that idea otherwise you're going to miss out on an awful lot.

And Peter in the second letter of Peter says it like it is:

"We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.

"We ourselves heard the voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain."

In other words we don't have to explain to you the meaning of what he'd said, or what he'd done or what it all meant for us or for the world. We didn't need to do that.

Because basically we were simply eyewitnesses of his majesty and we are here to tell you what we saw. We were eyewitnesses and we saw the glory of his majesty.

Well what's that got to do with us? – many might say, as they lie with a broken body under a collapsed building from the Turkish earthquake or are killed or abused by an invading Russian soldier, or are suffering in an unimaginable way in a corner of the world that the rest of the world has forgotten about or can't be bothered to think about.

It is true that our world is not the Disneyland some expect it to be. We often struggle with ourselves and even more with each other and the unpredictable environment in which we live. Sometimes the challenges we face are overwhelming.

If we are to engage with an image of divine glory it's important to not do so in a cloud of forgetting. Or with rose tinted glasses.

And it's important not to cheapen this transfiguration moment. The disciples going up the mountain with Jesus and seeing him transfigured would not have simply experienced a 'wow' or an OMG moment. One presumes that, even if they had mobile phones they wouldn't have been reaching for them to take a selfie. They would have been totally overwhelmed.

Powerful spiritual encounters are transformative and life changing. Some can be subtle and others, as we hear today from Peter, not so subtle. From the eye witness account that the Gospels give us I think we can safely say that this one was not so subtle.

In all three of the synoptic gospels we hear that Jesus went up to a high mountain - that place of contact with God – and was there transfigured in the presence of three of his disciples.

“His face” Matthew tells us “shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

This luminous transformation of Jesus has bedazzled mystics and inspired artists and poets throughout the Christian centuries.

But what does this event mean and why did Jesus appear to his disciples in such glory just six days after telling his disciples he must go to Jerusalem and be killed?

The great theologian Thomas Aquinas said that it was fitting for Christ to be manifested in his glory to his select Apostles because those who walk an arduous path need a clear sense of the goal of their journey.

Despite the struggle and for some the horror of this world; though we live and move within the confines of this world of space and time: we

are not meant finally for this world; we are summoned to life on high with God in a transformed state of existence.

Aquinas says that Jesus, at the Transfiguration, began to shine with the radiance of heaven so as to entrance us with the prospect of our own transfiguration.

And why were these three Apostles: Peter, John and James privileged with this vision of the true nature of Jesus?

The common theme that Aquinas points out is that they are bound to Jesus by love. Peter loved the Lord the most, despite Peter's human failings. John was the disciple most beloved of Jesus and is known in the Gospels as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. And James was the first of Jesus's intimate followers to prove the intensity of his love for Christ by giving his life. He would become the first martyr amongst the Apostles.

To see Jesus in his full glory it was, and still is, not good enough simply to follow his teachings. A living relationship needs to be developed.

And that brings us to Lent which is about to begin next week. A perfect time to bring ourselves back to the feet of Our Lord and sit in his Presence.

Sometimes I feel ready for Lent and other times I'm really not. At a time of year when buds are coming through and there are days of spring sunshine a Lenten discipline can feel tough, but it really does depend upon how we approach these things. Approaching Lent through the lens of the Transfiguration is a good start.

Our aim and our desire should be to move our discipleship forward from being a follower of Jesus's teaching to becoming a loving disciple.

This starts by offering our friendship, by giving Jesus some of our attention, to follow him to the mountaintop.

Our Lent course over the next 5 weeks on Prayer will help you to find a way to take you up that mountain to be with Jesus .

A prayer space is a good start. A sacred space we create. We can go inward and create an inner prayer space imagining ourselves in church or walking up to the top of a hill or sat under a tree.

Or we can focus on our physical space and always do our prayer in the same chair or perhaps a special corner of our room.

It is no coincidence that they all went up a mountain to have their high experience with Jesus. We too need to move our awareness up into a space away from the everyday in order to commune with God.

And what we seek is not so much teaching as a new relationship. Jesus cares deeply about us so if we ask him to be present and fill our hearts and our prayers he will be there.

So my message today from my privileged position to be able to give a sermon is simply to tell you to go up the mountain and see him transfigured.

Maybe now is the time to commit to spend time up that mountain, in prayer with Jesus, and to recognise the full enormity of who he is.

Our faith needs to take this step of experiencing the Transfiguration in our hearts. For this is the Christ. The Word who was with God and is God.

And once our hearts have seen this truth, then our heads will follow, taught by the Holy One himself.

So that we too can become vessels for his Holy Light.

Lent gives us that time and space and commitment to say to Jesus, "I take this seriously".

"I want to learn more".

"Help me understand the things that don't make sense to me."

"Show me more of the truth that I instinctively know about you."

"Take my half-hearted faith and transfigure it – shine through it and transform it"

"Be forever my companion and my guide."

And having done that we can set off on our journey of discipleship renewed, and changed, and ready, for a higher adventure.

Amen