

## **Transfiguration Sunday, Year B**

Exodus 24:12-18;

2 Corinthians 4:3-6;

Mark 9:2-9

The Gospel according to Mark is, of course, the shortest of the four gospels. Mark uses an economy of words and hurries the story along. His favourite word seems to be “immediately” as Jesus moves from one event to another.

But here, in our gospel reading, Mark slows it right down as Jesus takes time out. In fact Mark himself takes time to give us more detail than Matthew or Luke. This is an important moment and Mark wants us to know it. And together with Peter’s declaration in Mark 8 in Caesaria Philippi “You are the Christ” this event forms the central pivot in Mark’s gospel.

Up to now the focus has been on teaching, healing, miracles. But from this point on Mark starts to include references to Jesus’s suffering and death.

In fact I think that we cannot really understand this moment of transfiguration without reference to Peter’s declaration in Mark 8:29 and Jesus’s subsequent teaching in Mark 8:31 that he will suffer, be killed and rise again.

And you will recall that Peter takes objection to this.

Yes, Peter sees Jesus as Messiah but a suffering, dead Messiah does not accord with his ideas about how the Christ will behave. And in this he reflects the general expectation at the time that the Messiah will be a military General who will throw out the occupying Romans and reclaim the kingdom of Israel for God. But the true Messiah is about something much, much greater. He is much, much greater.

Now it’s interesting that as a prelude to Peter’s declaration Mark gives an account of the healing of a blind man. Now, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus takes time to open the eyes of the disciples to his true nature.

So, what occurs? Mark says it is six days later that they follow Jesus up a high mountain, possibly Mount Horeb. Perhaps Mark is intending to link this account with that of Moses in Exodus 24 when God asks him to climb Mount Sinai into the cloud of his presence where Moses waits for six days before God speaks.

But I very much doubt that this is in the minds of Peter, James and John as they climb. Probably they are expecting a private prayer meeting on the mountain. Well, they are in for a shock! Something totally extraordinary occurs, something completely foreign.

Jesus is transfigured before them, that is, he is completely changed into a different form. The Greek is that he metamorphoses.

We can use the same word metamorphosis of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly where the body of the butterfly is completely different from that of the caterpillar. It's not just a caterpillar with wings.

Here then is a glimpse of the divine glory of the Lord, a glory that he has temporarily laid aside to become man and all that entails, and will entail.

Of course, it is impossible for mere human beings to really comprehend this glory even if it is only a glimpse. In his appearances after his resurrection Jesus is changed but he doesn't shine with glory. Here he does.

Mark – as presumably Peter did – struggles for words to describe it. He focuses on the appearance of Jesus's clothes, whiter than anyone could bleach. Matthew chooses to concentrate on telling us that Jesus's face *shone like the sun*. Just imagine looking at that for a moment.

There is something momentous to understand here.

Peter has called Jesus the Messiah but he doesn't really get it, not yet. Here he calls Jesus, Rabbi, Master, Teacher, not Lord.

But it's important that he, and the others - and we too - understand who Jesus really is, in order to grasp the significance of his suffering, crucifixion and death. This is not a man executed for upsetting the Jewish authorities – although he did do that. This is God – and Peter, James and John need to see this – it is God willingly, even with great personal grief, God willingly giving his life for the forgiveness of sins of the whole world and the inbreaking of the heavenly kingdom.

Of course, Jesus's transfiguration isn't the only thing that is happening. Elijah and Moses appear, talking with Jesus. How do the disciples know that it is Elijah and Moses? We don't know, perhaps they just do. Nor do we know what they talked about. Mark doesn't tell us and perhaps Mark didn't know either.

But what might they be saying?

Are they encouraging Jesus not to give up at the point where he is consciously thinking about the enormity of what he is facing in suffering and death, and to stick to the plan?

Is Elijah talking about how he stuck his neck out and risked making a sacrifice on another mountain, Mount Carmel, in opposition to the prophets of Baal?

Is Moses reminding Jesus that although he received the law from God on still another mountain, Mount Sinai, law has universally failed to prevent people from sinning and falling short of the glory of God? That another way is needed, another more perfect sacrifice than the one that Elijah offered?

And there is Peter, wanting to make three shelters. Peter gets a bad press I think, probably because Mark writes *He did not know what to say, they were so frightened*. But is this fair on Peter? Wouldn't we be terrified if we were in this situation? Peter wants to domesticate it, to bring it down to his orbit of comprehension. Remember, this is before Jesus's death and resurrection, before the Holy Spirit is given bringing God into our hearts.

But there is danger in this too. Danger in making Jesus too comfortable, too cosy, of domesticating him to our image. He is still the awesome God, as Peter experienced. And there is a fine line between awe and terror.

The perfect love of God on the cross should serve to cast out terror. But I suggest that we should still be left with pounding hearts and open-mouthed awe as we contemplate the divine glory of our Lord.

God steps in. A cloud appears and covers them, the glory cloud of God's presence, just as on Mount Sinai when Moses climbed up to meet him. And, for the second time in Mark God speaks. Similar words to those at Jesus's baptism but this time spoken, not to Jesus but, to the three disciples. *This is my Son, whom I love*, with the added instruction *Listen to him*.

Earlier Peter had rebuked Jesus over talking about suffering and dying. Now God is saying *Listen!* You need to know this and understand what Jesus is talking about.

Similarly, I guess, God is saying to us: Listen to my Son. Don't try and fit him into your comforting, cosy mould that fails to disturb. Instead engage with the awesome glory of the real Jesus. Expand your understanding.

Lent begins on Wednesday. Moses had six days on the mountain before God spoke to him. The disciples had six days to process the fact that their Messiah was to be a suffering Messiah before they encountered his glory on the mountain top.

We have, not six days, but the six weeks of Lent to meditate on why the suffering and death of God's glorious beloved Son, our Saviour Christ, the Messiah, was necessary and our part in making it so.

So let us not rush into Easter and the joy of resurrection without first spending our six days, our six weeks, of waiting on the LORD for greater revelation and understanding of his glory in the light of the cross. Amen

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