

## The Transfiguration

19 4 09

*A sermon preached by the Revd Donald Pankhurst, former Priest-in -charge of St Bartholomew's Dinard*

At this season of Eastertide we read of the appearance of Jesus to his disciples, risen ascended, glorified, as in the words of a well-known hymn. Many New Testament scholars think that the account of the Transfiguration is really another episode of the Easter story. Whether it really belongs with the other Easter events, and the writer of the Gospel simply mislaid his notes; or whether it is a separate event, does not matter. It has to do with the purpose and ministry of Jesus on earth. Peter, James and John were being granted a vision which was denied to the other nine disciples. Something was being revealed to those three which was not yet being vouchsafed to the others – a revelation, a showing, in fact, an Epiphany: a drawing aside of a curtain.

There are three revelations in the early career of Jesus, and at each of these only a selected few witnesses were present: at his birth; a few shepherds, not the whole village; then the three visitors from the East, but not a crowd from Jerusalem; and now three disciples only not a multitude of Jesus' friends and followers – not even all the twelve. The appearance of Jesus in the world was to be a secret affair, not shouted from the housetops. For much of his ministry Jesus did all he could to prevent publicity. Have you ever wondered why? What was it in the purposes of god that should require such secrecy? After all, the mission of Jesus was to the whole world.

The time for shouting from the housetops would come: it did come on the first Whit Sunday, and from then on it was a matter of publishing the Gospel to the whole world. But not yet. Just now, it was the purpose of Jesus to make disciples; and that recruitment must be done in small numbers, not in crowds. The disciples were called one by one; and the revelation is now given only to the inner circle, Peter, James and John.

What actually happened? Was it a real thing or only a vision? Certainly they all three saw the same thing and heard the same words. The Mount of the Transfiguration is still a holy place for Christian visitors today. We led a party to Israel some years ago. We had planned a Holy Communion service there on the mountain, but a young newly-ordained priest in our party begged to be allowed to take the service, so I stepped aside and let him take over.

Whatever the explanation, the three disciples saw Moses and Elijah there with Jesus: Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, the two great strands in the religion of Israel. The Holy Scriptures said that Elijah would come again: And there he was, to usher in the Messiah, the Son of God.

There was much more for those disciples to learn, both about Jesus himself and his ministry. They had yet to learn about their own part in that total ministry. Jesus was to make himself known to his followers as being more than a good man with a message, a healer; he was more than human: he was the Messiah, yes, but even more than that he was the very Son of God. The human mind was not able

to comprehend that this flesh and blood man, with whom they had gone fishing, attended synagogue, eaten meals with, was God in Person. Of course it was going to take a long time and much painful readjustment of all that they knew about God, for these men even to begin to understand. That is why Jesus makes his revelation to only a few of his disciples at a time.

Later, all twelve would come to see Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. But then, soon after that, Jesus would be arrested, tried, condemned and crucified. All that they had just come to understand about Jesus would be once again overturned in their minds. But then, after that, they would be able to say with Thomas, My Lord and my God.

Risen, ascended, glorified. And it is the glorified Christ who appears with Moses and Elijah on the mountain; it is the Lord in his resplendent glory who appears to the three awe-stricken disciples.

In our own day, we can look back upon the life and doings of Jesus while on earth, and see the whole story. We sometimes wonder why the disciples were so slow on the uptake. But God's purpose is still being worked out today, and often we fail to see the signs. We too have moments both of insight and of incomprehension. May we too be thankful when some new thing becomes clear to us - our own little epiphany; and may we learn, as the disciples did, to trust that in God's good time all will be made clear.