

Transfiguration

10 2 13

Almighty Father,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross:
give us grace to perceive his glory,
that we may be strengthened to suffer with him
and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.

Our text may be found in today's gospel and is Luke chapter 9 and verse 32:

'since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory'

Do you ever have trouble staying awake during prayer? In church, the prayers are usually short, succinct, so not much chance there. At home, it may be different especially if you're praying at the end of a long, exhausting day. In church, you are more likely to fall asleep during the sermon but again you'd have to be quick about it and I do use small tricks, typical of the teacher I once was, to engage your attention and to stop you nodding off. But today's gospel once again highlights the fact that Peter, James and John have real difficulty staying awake when they've gone somewhere alone with Jesus to pray.

Today, the Three have gone with Jesus up a mountain, probably Mount Hermon, rising some 9,000 feet above sea level – no wonder, then, these fishermen are tired out from their climb. And there, while praying, something extraordinary

happens: Jesus is transformed and they see him in something of the heavenly light he has set aside as part of the cost of the incarnation. According to Luke's account, 'the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white.' The whiteness, brightness, of his garments is something that caught my attention as a child – the old advert for Persil you may recall – the boast of Persil whiteness was the weekly fact of my mother's washing – my clean white shirts for school – but here it was a whiteness no soap powder or detergent on earth could ever hope to match. Now I wonder how exactly the appearance of his face changed. There is only a simple statement without any detail. Perhaps there is a clue in the account of the trial of Stephen the deacon, protomartyr, when his face was transformed into the likeness of an angel. Does that mean Jesus was truly beautiful, truly radiant? Perhaps, but my guess is his outward appearance at that moment reflected his inner reality and that would be truly beautiful, full of light.

In the Transfiguration, there are three significant details we should note: the presence of Moses and Elijah; the descent of the cloud; the voice from heaven.

Moses and Elijah are representative: Moses of the Law, the Torah; Elijah of the Prophets. Jesus, rooted in the Old Testament, a circumcised Jew, has come to fulfil the promises of the Law and the Prophets. With Moses and Elijah, he talks about his exit strategy, what awaits him in Jerusalem: crucifixion; resurrection; ascension.

The cloud is the Shekinah, a sign of the presence of God. It is the cloud that removes Jesus from the disciples' sight when he ascends into heaven; it is the

cloud that fills the Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem at its dedication. The cloud is the impenetrable mystery which cloaks the majesty of God.

And the voice from heaven is the voice of God using parallel words with those heard at his baptism. At Jesus' baptism you may recall that the voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased." (Luke 2 v22). Now here the voice says, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.' Both are three-fold statements. Both state Jesus is the Son of God. But the voice at Jesus' baptism is speaking directly to Jesus himself whereas here the voice is meant for Peter, James and John.

Since my sermon on 30th December, when Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the Temple, over the past seven weeks, I've been asking the question when people knew Jesus was the Messiah. Here, it is not for Jesus' benefit that he is transformed into an unearthly radiance and beauty: it is for the three disciples present. It's for sleepy-headed Peter and James and John who are thrilled and terrified. They are the three privileged to see Jesus in glory before the horror of the crucifixion; the surprise and wonder of the resurrection; the joy of the ascension; and the energising thrill of Pentecost. Lucky guys ! So what do they do ? They keep 'schtum' – they don't say a word, not to a word to anyone until afterwards. Amazing or what ? It's only in the three gospels that we hear of the event well after the event but dear John, the beloved disciple, never even mentions it at all in his gospel ! I wonder why not ?

So this morning, in the Transfiguration, once again we have a sign and evidence that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, and that we should listen to him. As ever, there is a choice of whether we do or not but if we'd been on that mountain up there with Peter, James and John when Jesus was transfigured and we'd seen and heard what they did, then I think there would not have been much room for doubt.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermon 27 : Transfiguration

