

## Transfiguration

26 2 17

Almighty Father,  
whose Son was revealed in majesty  
before he suffered death on 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.  
*Collect for the Sunday next before Lent*

Father in heaven,  
whose Son Jesus Christ was wonderfully transfigured  
before chosen witnesses upon the holy mountain,  
and spoke of the exodus he would accomplish at Jerusalem:  
give us strength so to hear his voice and bear our cross  
that in the world to come we may see him as he is.  
*Collect for the Transfiguration of our Lord*

Our text today is Matthew chapter 17 and verse 2:

‘ And he was transfigured before them,  
and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ’

Today, our gospel reading is Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration. The feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord is 6<sup>th</sup> August but each year, on the Sunday next

before Lent, we hear either Matthew's or Mark's or Luke's account of the Transfiguration depending on whether it's year A, B or C in the Common Lectionary from which our readings are taken. Now, my question to you this morning is why is the Transfiguration the only festival that is ever celebrated twice in one year on different dates ?

And the answer - I don't know.

So this morning's sermon is pure speculation on my part, me trying to make sense of something odd that's caught my attention - why the Transfiguration twice at two different points in our calendar ?

Well, where better to start than to see when ? where ? and what ? :

- when it happened;
- where it happened;
- and what happened.

The Transfiguration happened six days after Peter correctly answered Jesus' question to his disciples, 'But who do you say that I am ?' (Mk 8 v29). And Peter, without hesitation, said, 'You are the Messiah'. The road to Jerusalem now lay ahead.

The Transfiguration happened on a high mountain apart. Scholars identify either Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon with the balance in favour of the latter. But

whatever the mountain, high places were places of God–encounter; Moses on Mount Sinai; Elijah on Mount Horeb.

What happened was literally transfiguration: Jesus' face, Jesus' clothes – bright, white, radiant. The appearance of Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets that Jesus had come to complete and to fulfil. A cloud descending, the Shekinah, the cloud of the presence of God and, from that cloud, a voice with words that echoed those heard at the baptism of Jesus: **'This is my Son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased: listen to him.'** Then the three disciples present – Peter, James and John are told not to tell anyone what they'd seen till after the resurrection and John kept his word and didn't even include the transfiguration in his gospel even though he'd been there at the time !

So what we have in the Transfiguration is a clear confirmation of who and what Jesus is: a vision of him in glory, a God–encounter that takes place as Jesus prepares to set his face to Jerusalem to confront his destiny: his death, his departure, his exodus which will free Man from the slavery of sin to new life in God just as the Jews were freed from slavery in Egypt.

Fine. But I still haven't answered the question – 'Why two dates ?' Well, according to my copy of 'The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church' that once belonged to Sybil Fagg, the 6<sup>th</sup> August is an arbitrary date established in the Fifteenth Century by Pope Callistus III to be a universal celebration to commemorate the victory gained over the Turks at Belgrade on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1456, news of which reached Rome on 6<sup>th</sup> August !

So that accounts for one date, but liturgically why another ? Simply, I think, because to place it on the Sunday just before Ash Wednesday fits so well in preparing us for Lent, Holy Week and Easter. Where better to start a period of spiritual discipline than with the fact of who Jesus truly is – the Son of God our Lord and Saviour. If Jesus is first to suffer, then how can we expect a pain-free life ? But whatever is to come, no matter, given that in the end all will be well.

So I trust you are happy that we should have two opportunities to mark Jesus' transfiguration. On a mountain, three disciples saw him as he truly is and, now, it is an open secret which can transform our lives.

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

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

*26<sup>th</sup> February 2017*

G: Sermons 35 : Transfiguration

