

Transfiguration Sunday - Matthew 17:1-9

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help...My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. (Psalm? 121)

I just about remember my great uncle Edgar who was a miner living in Rhiwfawr atop the Swansea Valley, He'd let us look through his telescope at the night sky which was so clear because Edgar and Katie's cottage was miles away from anywhere - and what we saw as kids was just mind-bogglingly amazing. I'm sure you've had similar experiences when the world as you'd known it up until that point is suddenly transformed; when you begin to see things in a totally different way. (If you've ever looked through a microscope you get a similar surprise). Well we'd have to ratchet that up quite a few notches on the amazement or 'gob-smacked' scale to even begin to have some sense of what was going on in our gospel account. Here we have Peter, James and

John being completely overwhelmed and non-plussed when they were confronted with a new reality about Jesus...and it was probably very tempting for them to think they were just hallucinating. But it's a very strange hallucination: - for a start they shared in the experience - and actually it has all sorts of clues of authenticity about it, which we'll see in just a moment.

Jewish scriptures and traditions tell of events like this: when the veil of *ordinariness* in a situation is suddenly drawn back to disclose a far more significant reality - and one that's potentially life changing. It was certainly hugely important for Peter, because (if you noticed in our reading from his epistle) he retells his mountaintop experience to the new Christians in Asia Minor (which corresponds to modern day Turkey) who are having a hard time and feel like giving up on their newly discovered Christian faith because the pressure's

too great. Peter says: "*You'll do well to be attentive to this as a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*" He's using his own experience of Jesus on the mountaintop to encourage them - and I want the Transfiguration to do that for us today - to *encourage us; encourage us to see what we might have thought to be so familiar in new and refreshing ways; to breathe life and renewal into our life together with God.*

But what *are* we to say about it? The three observers were of course absolutely terrified. Peter (whom we're getting to know a little by now) blurts out the first thing that pops into his head - true to form - trying not only to prolong the moment (to memorialize it as I had to get used to in the States where they turn nouns into verbs!), - but Peter may also have been trying to hook it into one of the Jewish festivals - who knows.

Of course that wasn't the point - but as the New Testament scholar Tom Wright says, "*the sheer oddity of his bumbling, babbling suggestion is itself strong evidence of the story's basic truth. Nobody inventing a tale like this would make up such a comic moment - lowering the tone of the occasion in such a fashion.*"

So is it possible to look at the whole thing not just from a human point of view, but from God's perspective? - because this was something Jesus certainly urged the disciples to do. Indeed if we take stock of their experience so far in following him, Jesus has progressively been leading the disciples up to 'higher' ground - which is a great metaphor for getting a fresh view of what God's kingdom is all about.

I love mountains and still have a vivid memory of being 14,000 feet up in the Colorado Rockies and also looking down on Albuquerque in New Mexico from Sandia Crest (which is almost 11,000 feet). (If you've

ever caught 'Breaking Bad' on TV there's always a shot of the incredible Sandia mountain range.

A little less majestic but still brilliant, when we lived in Crickhowell and Sue was still able, we would climb the Black Mountains together and it wouldn't be long before we were high enough to look down on the tornado fighter jets doing their low-flying practice runs.

Experiences that give us a different perspective.

And it takes the new perspective Jesus is unveiling to them for the disciples to get an inkling of what God might be up to. Just for a moment they get a glimpse of the reality of God's kingdom and the central truth: that - even though he didn't look at all like what they were expecting - Jesus really was (really is) the Messiah - the Chosen One, the King, the deliverer - God's anointed One - the Christ.

Jesus takes the disciples literally up a high mountain. What does it all mean? Why do two of the prophets suddenly appear? What does this say about the reality of Jesus' work?

Well simply this: Jesus was continuing and completing the tasks of the great prophet Elijah, and behind him, the greatest prophet of old - Moses himself. (Both of them interestingly had disappeared from view rather than dying in the ordinary way - and legends had grown up that somehow they'd been spared the normal process of dying). Anyway here they reappear - with that veil of ordinariness drawn back for a moment - and Jesus is with them, wearing clothes so white that not even the best chemically boosted detergent could bleach them like it.

Perhaps it's not surprising that we're often a bit fuzzy about what the Transfiguration is all about. It probably *isn't* a revelation of Jesus' divinity - because if

it were, that would make Elijah and Moses divine too - and that's certainly not what the Gospel writers want us to think. No, - and I'm going to quote Tom Wright again here: *"this is a sign of Jesus being entirely caught up with, bathed in, the love, power and kingdom of God, so that it transforms his whole being with light, in the way that music can transform words when they are sung. This is the sign that Jesus is not just indulging in fantasies about God's kingdom, but that he is speaking and doing the truth. It's a sign that he is indeed the true prophet, the true Messiah."*

Because this is what the voice is saying: Jesus is God's special, beloved son. Elijah and Moses were vital in preparing the way (John the Baptist, too) - but Jesus is finishing the job. Matthew would probably be happy that we, who get to read this part of his gospel much, much later on, are hearing deeper meanings of Jesus as *Son of God* - but for the disciples at the time, simply

trying to get their heads around the idea that Jesus really *is* the Messiah their people had been waiting for is probably enough to be going on with. And indeed a lot of their understanding of what all this meant in terms of what we call the Incarnation only began to occur to them after Jesus was 'glorified' (as John often says in *his* gospel) - in other words after he came back from the dead. And that's why they're probably utterly confused when he tells them to wait 'until the Son of Man was risen from the dead" before feeling free to tell people all about it. While we know how the story ends, *they* certainly didn't...

Now while we don't generally have such dramatic experiences, each one of us is called to do what the heavenly voice said. (& what was it?) "...Listen to him". Listen to Jesus, because he's *God's* beloved son. Everything we need to know about *God* is revealed in

him (that's what Epiphany was all about - and that's why I left talking about 'what does God look like' until this week). Here's how Tom Wright ends his reflection:

"...as we learn to listen, even if sometimes we get scared and say all the wrong things, we may find that glory creeps up on us unawares, strengthening us, as it did the disciples, for the road ahead."

...a road, as we shall be considering these next few weeks in Lent that led to a cross on a piece of waste ground outside Jerusalem. But more of that to come...

Remember Peter wanted to stay there up on the mountaintop - wanted to preserve the moment, but instead it's Luke who tells us, "the very next day", they had to descend to the valley (if you remember) and the needy crowds below who were peeved that the other disciples were unable to heal a boy possessed by demonic forces. Why the chronology - that particular

sequence of events? Well perhaps because it's down here in the stuff of normal life and struggle, turmoil and messiness and questions that the gospel is most relevant. The only real way to preserve the value of spiritual experience is to use it - and that's what Jesus does when he comes down from the mountain.

A wise person said once that **true faith** is meeting God in the private place and then serving God in the market place.

So to have his Father telling him how pleased and delighted he was, and how much he loved him would have warmed the heart of Jesus and encouraged him during his lonely mission amongst the cruelty he was going to be facing. As it does with us when we bless and encourage one another - rather than criticise.

So what about the application to us - to *our* lives? We need to understand better who Jesus is - and to *know the love of the Father* - to hear his voice - to hear

him speaking words of love, acceptance, affirmation, forgiveness, grace - favour. And my prayer is that that becomes a **present** - a **now** experience for each one of us, as we discover *God* with us in *our* dark valleys.

"Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, *but only Jesus.*"

When we read the story of the Transfiguration on this Sunday before Lent it poses one simple question: will we - will you and I - follow this *God-man*, Jesus of Nazareth? And will we allow the Holy Spirit to give us fresh perspectives - new ways of looking at what *God* might be doing in our lives - and grasping afresh the purpose of why this community in St Barnabas & this Ministry Area of Llŵchwr is here. Because as we allow the Holy Spirit more freedom to work in and through us it's going to lead us into deeper adoration - and lives that look more like that of the beloved Son - our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ? **Amen**