

Transfiguration Mark 9: 2 – 9 Year B

Last Sunday after Epiphany

This is the last Sunday before Lent: that season of reflection and penitence where Christians are encouraged to re-examine their spiritual lives and review what it means to be a follower of Jesus before entering the Holy Week of Easter.

Over the last few weeks we have seen Jesus begin his ministry: the calling of the disciples, the numerous healings and proclaiming of the message that the Kingdom of God has come near. But today we've skipped about eight chapters to the rather mysterious story of the transfiguration on an unnamed mountain. So why this story just before Lent?

Well, in the previous chapter Jesus had just asked the disciples who they think he really is and Peter had answered "You are the Messiah". Jesus has then foretold his violent death and resurrection to the no doubt dismayed disciples and Peter has rebuked him. Then Jesus has called the crowd and told them that to be his follower is to deny oneself, take up their cross and follow him. It is important to keep that in mind as we come to the Transfiguration.

Six days later, probably after the revelation and rebuke, Jesus takes Peter, James and John (the inner circle of disciples) and leads them up an unnamed mountain. There are various theories as to which mountain it was, some say the mountain was Mount Tabor where today there is a church aptly named Church of the Transfiguration, while others have argued for the more remote Mount Hermon as the site, we just don't know.

At the top of the mountain Jesus is transfigured. His clothes become dazzling white, Marks says such as no one on earth could bleach them. (No doubt the envy of dry cleaners everywhere!). In Jewish literature white clothes symbolise the divine, heavenly realm and Jesus undergoes what Brendan Byrne calls a metamorphosis, from the Greek *morphe* which "refers to the way in which the inner being of a person displays itself outwardly".¹

¹ "A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel", Brendan Byrne, 2008, p.145.

What the disciples witness in the Transfiguration is the glory of God in the revealing of Jesus for who and what he truly is: the bridge between heaven and earth, between humans and God, the beloved Son of God, the long awaited Messiah. So it is no wonder that the two Messianic forerunners Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus.

Remember in the gospels that people were often asking John the Baptist if he is Elijah or the prophet. And in the previous chapter when Peter declared “You are the Messiah”, it was in response to a conversation about who people thought Jesus was because speculation was rife that Jesus was either Elijah or the prophet. Why Elijah? Well as we heard earlier in the Hebrew Scriptures Elijah had a very unusual departure from this world and it had been prophesied that he would return just before the coming of the Messiah. Also that an unnamed prophet, another Moses, would also arise at this time. Elijah and Moses were the two hotly anticipated figures of the arrival of the Messiah. So when they appear talking to Jesus, it is, in a sense, visual affirmation of Peter’s Messianic statement.

And it completely overwhelms the disciples. Peter stammers, “It is good for us to be here (how’s that for an understatement) ...let us make three dwellings”. Peter was probably referring to the festival of booths that commemorated the Exodus liberation and also had significance in the prophecies about the coming Messiah.

Then the overshadowing cloud and the voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!”. This incident immediately reminds us of Jesus’ baptism, and the voice from heaven declaring, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased’.

This time, however, there isn’t only an affirmation of Jesus’ true identity, there is a command, “listen to him”. Particularly in light of what has just proceeded and what is to come. Because there is going to be a disjunction, a massive anomaly between what the disciples desire and expect in the coming of the Messiah: liberation and putting their world to rights, and what they are actually going to witness in the coming weeks: the arrest, torture, crucifixion of Jesus as well as the destruction of their hopes and dreams.

Peter, James and John have glimpsed the glory of God in this dramatic, mystical experience. What they are yet to hear are Jesus' repeated warnings about his death. They are to listen to Jesus, even when it doesn't match their hopes and dreams of how things should be. What they, along with the other disciples, will have to realise is that there can't be the glory without the suffering. It will be a lesson in discipleship: there has to be the suffering of denial to self and the daily taking up one's cross if one is to truly follow Jesus and obtain eternal glory.

Yet it is to be a suffering that will transform, not only Jesus, but the disciples and eventually the whole world. What Peter, James and John witness in the transfiguration is the sustaining glimpse of hope and reassurance that all shall be well despite what is about to occur.

That is why this story is told just before Lent, because we too are given a sustaining glimpse of the ultimate climax to a story that in the next few weeks, will take a dark, unexpected and devastating turn for the disciples. It is a foretaste of divine glory, light and love that will overcome the terrible approaching violence and darkness, and transform suffering into glory.

So as we journey into Lent, my question for all of us is: what are we seeing and hearing in our life of faith? What are we needing to see and hear? What voices are we listening to? And what voices do we need to be listening to? What is needing to be transformed?

The Lord be with you.