

Sermon, Feast of the Transfiguration

Sunday, 7th August, 2022, Quairading and York

Readings: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 97; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Mark 9:2-10

Hymns: Immortal, Invisible, God only wise; How good Lord to be here; Crown him with many crowns; Christ whose glory fills the sky; Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord

The Transfiguration of Jesus is an event reported in all three Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament; it is when Jesus is transfigured (we might think of transformed) and becomes radiant in glory upon a mountain. The Second Letter of St Peter hereby provides an account of the Transfiguration by an eyewitness. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus and three of his apostles, Peter, James, John, go to the top of a mountain (the Mount of Transfiguration) to pray. On the mountain, Jesus begins to shine with bright rays of light. Then the prophets Moses and Elijah appear next to him, and Jesus speaks with them. Jesus is then called "Son" by a voice in the sky, God the Father, a scene reminiscent of the Baptism of Jesus.

Many Christian traditions, including the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and our own commemorate the event, the Feast of the Transfiguration, as a major festival. That is why we are celebrating it today. In fact, our lectionary provides for it to be celebrated twice; earlier in the liturgical year it is celebrated as the last Sunday in the Season of Epiphany, thereby placing it directly before the drama of Lent and Easter.

The Transfiguration is also one of the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels. This miracle is unique amongst those that appear in the Canonical gospels for the miracle happens to Jesus himself. Very significantly, the Transfiguration is one of the five major milestones in the gospel narrative of the life of Jesus, the others being his Baptism, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension.

In Christian teaching, the Transfiguration is a pivotal moment; the setting on the mountain is presented as the point where human nature meets God: the meeting place of the temporal and the eternal, with Jesus himself as the connecting point, acting as the bridge between heaven and earth.

For the disciples Peter, James and John, the Transfiguration is a critical point in their understanding of whom Jesus is. They were, quite properly, people born of and experienced in the Old Covenant; the Transfiguration indicates that this Old Covenant is about to be completed with a New Covenant.

For Jewish disciples, this could not have been somewhat earth-shattering. The Mosaic Law, by which they lived, was how they had defined their lives, whether that be in how well they achieved it, or how spectacularly they didn't. A New Covenant with another more dramatic way of understanding humanity's relationship to, and with, God would have been almost an unfathomable thought.

Might we remind ourselves what is revealed to Peter, James, and John in this episode in the life and ministry of Jesus; a voice from Heaven claims Jesus as his son and instructs the disciples to listen to him. This takes place after Jesus is seen conversing with Moses and Elijah. Therein lies the indicators of the end of the age represent by the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). For the disciples, people used to living by the instruction of the Law and the Prophets their entire lives, hear an audible voice, that of God in Heaven telling them to listen to Jesus. In this moment there is the revelation of a reordering of their understanding of whom Jesus is, not just by a visual transfiguration but by divine fiat, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he takes precedence over the Law and the Prophets.

The story also reminds us that we cannot be just New Testament Christians for to be so, is to fail to understand the full message of the Gospel, and what God has been trying to accomplish since the very beginning of time in his relationship with his chosen people, the Jews. The old covenant, albeit dominated by law and prophecy, always pointed to a coming Messiah. Think of how often the concept of the Messiah appears in the Books of the Old Testament, and not least in the writings of the prophets. The Old Covenant contains a beautiful message of God speaking to the people he wanted to return to loving him. If you only read the New Testament, you will hear the Gospel message, but you will be missing a lot of foundational underpinning that makes the followers of Christ also the spiritual children of Abraham. Jesus is God the Son. His ministry on Earth was to display the coming kingdom of God and reveal the pathway to citizenship in that kingdom. In order to do this, Jesus revealed his divine nature to humanity in very real ways. The Transfiguration event is probably the most definitive revelation of Jesus as divine next to the Resurrection itself.

It is worthy of note that in all the Synoptic Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration, albeit each with their slightly different emphases, the account of the Transfiguration is located almost exactly in the middle of the Gospel, and is the climax of its turning point. In St Mark's Gospel that climax begins in the final verses of Chapter 8 when Mark records:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others,

Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

And the Gospel goes on:

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

And Mark concludes the Chapter by reporting:

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words[jj] in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

At this point in the narrative, the emphasis of the mission and ministry of Jesus as recorded by St Mark changes; thus far, Jesus has been teaching and healing. With the Transfiguration experience and its explanation as a clear response to the conversation about who Jesus is, the focus moves to being about his journey to Jerusalem, where He will die. As you will note from the verses, I have just read from St Mark’s Gospel, immediately before the Transfiguration, Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus has predicted his death and resurrection to which Peter expresses serious objections, and then Jesus begins to teach his disciples the nature of the renunciation of discipleship. It is here then, that after these words of sacrifice and death, the Transfiguration reaffirms the identity of Jesus, reveals his glory, and calls the disciples to listen to him.

As we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord it is timely to affirm what might be our answer to the second question Jesus asked directly of his disciples “But who do you say that I am?” Pray God your answer might affirm that Jesus is not only greater than the Law and the Prophets, but that you believe that he is the New Covenant of Grace that brings humanity to salvation and brings glory to God.