

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, welcome once again to Transfiguration Sunday. We remember the transfiguration every year at about this time. And every year, I fester over how best to preach it to you.

Normally the Gospels are quite straightforward to preach on. If the passage is one of Jesus' parables, there's always abundant ways in which the imagery of the parable interacts with our lives, or if the story is one about Jesus healing sick people, well ... we too have sick people who need to be healed, and it's not hard to see a direct correlation between the Gospel story and life as we experience it. But where do we fit the transfiguration in?

'Jesus was transfigured before them', just as we ... what?

There's no way of finishing this sentence satisfactorily. Seeing Jesus transfigured is not part of our experience. I'm not wanting to deny that we have mystical experiences (at least, I know that some of us have) but they are not really on the same scale as this one, and in truth, the closest you get around here to seeing someone in robes of dazzling white is me in my ecclesiastical frock, and it's hardly an encouraging comparison!

I don't understand what happens at the transfiguration. This is not something that has any place in my experience. I don't know what to do with this...Of course, the disciples in the story didn't know what to do with it either.

It's interesting, as you read through the story as it's told in Matthew 17, you'll find that the predominant moods throughout are either of confusion or fear.

Jesus climbed up a mountain with a handful of his friends, and we don't know exactly what they had been doing up there when this happened (perhaps eating lunch) but all of a sudden there were bright lights, strange voices, and shadowy figures from the past up there on the mountain with them!

Peter, we’re told, panicked, and started coming out with some gibberish about setting up a few tents to make these mystical spirits from the past somehow more comfortable, but he shuts up completely when he and his friends hear voices coming out of the cloud, and then we’re told that the small group fell down on their faces, as their panic and confusion was replaced with terror!

Jesus takes the initiative in addressing their fear. He tells them, “rise and have no fear.” Indeed, not only does He tell them this, but the Gospel writer tells us quite explicitly that he touched them! He came over to them and touched them and said, “Rise and have no fear”. And they rose, and the fear passed, but the confusion, so far as I can see, remained.

One thing that has always been very clear to me about this story is that whatever happened that day on the mountaintop between Jesus and His disciples was something that happened for the sake of the disciples.

I don’t think this is a contentious point. I don’t think I’ve ever come across any Biblical scholar arguing that the transfiguration happened because Jesus, for some reason, had to touch base somehow with Moses and Elijah to complete His mission, such that the transfiguration was some matter of divine necessity. No. Whatever took place on that mountaintop that day took place for the sake of the disciples. It was for their benefit, which is what makes the story even more perplexing, as it’s not immediately obvious, I don’t think, how this experience was supposed to benefit the disciples.

It is a confusing experience that the disciples do not talk about afterwards. Indeed, they are commanded by Jesus not to talk about it afterwards, and there was no debriefing session coming from Jesus on this occasion either. What were this small group of friends supposed to make of

this experience. Was it just supposed to be something of a hit - ie. an adrenaline rush, designed to pick them up a bit?

Certainly, these boys had been through a hard time and could have done with an uplifting experience - I don't doubt that. They were in the middle of an intensive campaign of preaching and healing - doing long hours and dealing with difficult people - and moreover, as we come across the group here in Matthew 17, they have just been through a reasonably intense confrontation with Jesus Himself over how they were supposed to understand him and their mission.

That was the main subject of Matthew Chapter 16, where Jesus had asked his travelling companions who they thought he was, to which Peter ultimately gave the stunning reply, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” This was evidently a key turning point in the relationship between Jesus and His disciples, as up until that point the whole issue about Jesus' real identity was a topic they were all trying to avoid discussing openly.

Jesus pops the question. Peter nails the answer, and Jesus congratulates him but then He goes on to fill Peter and the other disciples in on exactly what it means for him to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and it's not at all what they had been expecting. Jesus tells them that it's all about suffering and struggle and torture and death, and Peter, if you remember the story, takes Jesus to task over this, and understandably so, for he and the other disciples had believed up to that point that following Jesus had been a good career move!

I'm not suggesting that Peter and his friends were following Jesus only because they thought it would lead them to positions of status and power and great material wealth, but at the very least I think they all believed up to that point that by following Jesus their lives would be improved!

Isn't that what they were supposed to believe? Isn't this what Christian people have always believed? Isn't that the very testimony we're supposed to give - that before I met Jesus my life was full of struggle and pain but that now I've got women, money, everything I want! Isn't that what I heard the late-night tele-evangelist promising me, and isn't that supposed to be essentially what every religion is about - that it makes your life better?

Yet Jesus tells his people that following Him means shedding blood, and all of it your own, concluding with a sobering warning: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (16:24-25)

And it's very confusing. It is very confusing for anybody to be told that they ought to take up a religion when the only thing they are promised in return for their troubles is a painful death (in the short term, at least)!

Had Jesus really got it right? Is this really the whole truth about God? Do we really have to go the path of faith and voluntary poverty? Is self-sacrifice really the essence of the spiritual life? How seriously should we take Jesus? Shouldn't we at least try to mediate his words with a bit of common sense?

As I read the Gospel of Matthew it seems as if God's answer to this confusion on the part of the disciples is to give them an experience that in itself is even more confusing, except at one point, and this, I think, is the crucial point, and it comes as the disciples are face down on the ground in fear - the words that they hear coming from the cloud: "This is my beloved son ... Listen to Him!" Was that really Moses and Elijah, come back from the dead, dialoguing with Jesus like old friend? Was that really the voice of God speaking from the cloud? If so, was it a male or a female voice ... or

something else? Did Jesus' own body really shine with a dazzling light, or was it something in the heads of the disciples - a corporate vision of sorts that they all shared, such that if we'd been there we might not have seen it?

We have no idea, I think, what really happened, but what we do know is that it got the message through to the disciples - that Jesus, despite His seemingly crazy ideas about God and the religious life, had to be listened to!

"This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"

There is much about God and about Jesus Himself that I do not understand, but perhaps that's because there's a lot I'm not expected to understand and don't need to understand. There is one thing though that I am reminded this morning that I do need to understand, and that is that I need to listen to Him.

Let us not underestimate the importance of this command that comes to us directly from the cloud this morning - 'listen to Him' - for there are many competing voices that demand to be listened to. On this transfiguration Sunday through let us once again dare to heed the voice coming from inside the cloud instead, and listen to Him! Amen.