

The Transfiguration...

... Fix your eyes upon Jesus

A sermon given on the the Sunday Next Before Lent, 14th February 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Attended Communion Service.

Mark 9:2-9

It's a very other-worldly scene, isn't it, depicted in that reading: Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop; his clothes dazzling white; and these great figures from Israel's past, Moses and Elijah talking with him; and this voice from heaven, "This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him." It's an interesting contrast, because much of Mark's gospel presents a very down to earth, a very human Jesus: 'Jesus, the Son of Man.' But this passage seems to be emphasizing the divinity of Jesus: 'Jesus, the Son of God.' So what are we to make of it all?

The temptation, I think, is to use this passage as a shortcut to the happy ending. In Mark, there are famously no resurrection appearances of Jesus - there's an empty tomb, but no risen Lord himself. So some commentators read this passage as Mark's version of the resurrection: here we see Jesus, as it were, in his resurrection body, so we can be sure that whatever happens, everything will be all right in the end. On this reading, faith in Jesus Christ can be criticised as distracting us from the injustices and unpleasantness of the real world by taking us off into some other-worldly heavenly realm where everything is fluffy and nice.

And in these days, with a pandemic raging; all of us going stir-crazy in lock down; the economy in free fall; and sadly, more funerals than I can ever remember - it's quite tempting to look up to heaven and focus only on Jesus in his glory. But I think that would be to misunderstand the passage. Whenever I'm confronted by a passage in the Bible I'm not too sure about, there are two tools I try to use to understand it. One of these is to look at the context: how does this particular passage sit within the unfolding narrative around it? And the other tool is to ask, 'Does this passage remind me of any other parts of the Bible? Are there echoes I can pick up elsewhere that might help me to understand this?' And both of these tools are helpful here.

The passage comes at a key moment in Mark's gospel, right in the middle. The early chapters of Mark's Gospel have focused on this question 'Who is Jesus? Who is this man who does all these extraordinary things and says extraordinary things?' And in chapter 8

Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter has identified him as the Messiah, the anointed king of Israel. And then for the first time, after that great acclamation, Jesus predicts his suffering, his rejection by the leaders of the people and his approaching death. And the disciples struggle to accept it. And Jesus then at the end of chapter 8, challenges them to choose: either side with the chief priests and the scribes who think that the Messiah cannot suffer and die; or else take Jesus's side and follow the way of the cross. As he says, "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the son of man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father."

So if you want to be a follower of Jesus, you can't fudge it: either you share the judgment of the world, which is all about seeking a shortcut to success and glory and sees the cross as a defeat, a failure and a dead end; or you share the judgment of God, which is that it is necessary in following the way of love in this fallen world, to lose your life, to take up your cross and deny yourself and follow Jesus - and anything else is an illusion. And on this St Valentine's Day, that's a particularly challenging word to hear about what love actually looks like.

The Transfiguration comes as Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem and meet the fate awaiting him there. His appearance in Glory on the Mountain affirms and validates the course he is taking - this is what it means to be the Son of God.

So that's the context.

And I wonder, does this scene remind you of any others in the scriptures? Well, for me, yes, it does, actually. There's Moses receiving the law and the Ten Commandments from the Lord on Mount Sinai and coming down with his face transfigured by the glory of having been with God face to face. And there's Elijah on the run from a murderous king, seeking refuge on Mount Horeb and hearing the voice of God - not in the earthquake or the wind or the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence. And who does Jesus meet on this mountain? Moses and Elijah, both of whom had their mountaintop experiences just at the point in their ministries when they were being called to face opposition; to challenge those in power; to undergo rejection and suffering; and whose only support was their faith in God. And in the previous chapter in Mark, there has been a discussion about whether Jesus is a second Elijah or a second John the Baptist - John's ministry having echoed that of Elijah - and in the verses immediately after this reading, the discussion about Elijah continues with Jesus repeating that he must suffer and be raised from the dead.

So the point seems to be this, that Jesus is a prophet in the line of Moses and Elijah and John the Baptist. But he is more than a prophet, he is God's own Son. And as prophet and Son of God, his destiny is to confront the powers oppressing the human race, powers, both political and spiritual. And he is to undergo suffering and rejection and death, and that his willingness to walk that path, paradoxically reveals his glory. Glory, success and triumph are found not by avoiding defeat and death, but by embracing it in trusting obedience to God. And the implication is that those who obey the voice on the mountain and who listen to the son of God are those who are willing to accompany him on his journey, who will deny themselves and take up their own crosses and follow him, and in so doing will share in his glory.

I don't know what that looks like for you in your situation. I certainly don't want to sound as if I'm commending suffering for its own sake - I don't believe that's the case. But in Jesus's case, his suffering was the direct result of challenging the status quo; confronting those in power, setting free those who suffered oppression because of other people's greed or willingness to exploit them, and maybe we're just not willing enough to suffer in that way.

There's certainly no shortage of injustice and cruelty in our world today. Why don't we make more of a nuisance of ourselves, to expose it and speak up against it, and try and put it right? But at the very least, we can shoulder our own hardships without magnifying them - it's so tempting to turn ourselves into victims and to blame others, to 'judge cuts' – and in Lent for 40 days, we have an opportunity to develop that discipline of learning how to 'lose our lives in order to save them.'

At the end of this morning's reading, the disciples look around and it says they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus, and that, surely, is a good way for us to begin Lent, to turn away from all the distracting sights and sounds, to fix our eyes on Jesus and to follow him on the path allotted to Jerusalem and all that awaits him there.

Reading Text

Mark 9:2-9

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.