

The Transfiguration ...

... *“This is My Son - listen to him”*

A sermon given on the Sunday next before Lent, 27th February 2022, by the Curate the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster

Luke 9:23-43a

Today's gospel reading recounts the Transfiguration, that moment when the disciples Peter, John and James went up the mountain with Jesus to pray and there witnessed the changed appearance of Jesus. Jesus in all his brilliant, bright white blaze of glory, talking with Moses and Elijah.

The news this week has been truly shocking, the likes of which we haven't seen for many years. So this morning, with Ukraine ever present in our thoughts and the latest news bulletin ringing in our ears, this mountaintop scene may seem a world away from the reality of our day to day experience at the moment. So how can it possibly speak to us or guide us today?

Well, at first hearing, the gospel reading may sound like two quite mismatched passages have been bolted together. The account of the Transfiguration is immediately followed by the encounter at the foot of the mountain of the disciples and Jesus with the man whose son is in desperate need of help and the failure of the disciples to heal the boy. The rarefied, holy and faith-filled air at the top of the mountain has quickly turned to the messy, awkward and doubtful atmosphere at the bottom.

So I want to suggest this morning that it is exactly this contrast between the top of the mountain and the bottom of the mountain that offers us both challenge and reassurance today. There's no doubt that the top of the mountain, in the presence of God offers a special and holy moment. But importantly, it is not only a moment in which Jesus is transfigured before the disciples eyes - it is also a moment in which the three disciples are, as a result, transfigured and changed themselves. They will be forever changed by what they have witnessed; what they have seen cannot be unseen.

I think it's understandable that Peter, awestruck by the moment, offers to build three dwellings for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. He wants somehow this moment to never

end; to preserve in some way in permanent form what he has witnessed. But to do so would be to miss the point. They aren't meant to stay up the mountain forever. Jesus has work to do. His conversation with Moses and Elijah already discusses his departure. But notably, the same word that is translated as 'departure' could equally be translated as 'exodus' - Jesus's rescue plan. But now it's not just the transfigured Jesus who has work to do, it is also the transfigured disciples.

God speaks to them on the mountain and says, *"This is my son. Listen to him."* The first time God uttered similar words, *"This is my son in whom I am well pleased"* was at Jesus's baptism: the commissioning of Jesus's ministry. Now, when God speaks, He speaks to the disciples and is telling them to listen to his son: He is commissioning them; their transfiguration happens for a reason; for their lives to be transformed and newly empowered. So much as they'd like to stay forever in that hallowed place, they are called to travel down the mountain and carry on, not just as a follower of Jesus, but truly as a disciple: to do what Jesus does. And now this applies to each one of us. In some sense, we have come up the mountain this morning by being here in this place, and it may seem like a welcome relief from all that we see going on outside. We may be weary just as the disciples were weary, but here we are in a Holy place. We have come to sit in the presence of Jesus and in a moment we will receive his presence as we celebrate Holy Communion together. With all that is going on in the world, just as Peter did, we may wish to stay here for a while. But we are likewise called to listen and follow Jesus. We are called always to travel down the mountain, changed by the encounter that we have this morning. We only need to turn to the preceding verses to today's passage to hear what it might mean to listen to Jesus. Jesus said this, *"If anyone of you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me - for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but forfeit or lose themselves?"*

It seems clear that path we are asked to follow is not without challenge. I was struck this week by the words of Archbishop Stephen in the emergency debate on the Ukraine in the House of Lords when he said this, *"Jesus urged his followers to be peacemakers, not simply peace lovers."* This is an important distinction because it is a call to action. As we travel down the mountain, as we go from this place, we are

called not simply to be passive observers, but active participants, where belief and trust leads us on to doing God's will in the world.

Raphael famously painted this scene in his painting 'The Transfiguration.' It's an interesting picture - I encourage you to have a look at it afterwards. The upper half shows Jesus, Moses and Elijah as one would expect, in radiant clouds of white. But, the bottom of the canvas conveys the difficulties at the foot of the mountain: there are pained and panicked faces as the disciples cannot cure the sick boy. The top of the mountain is beautiful; the bottom of the mountain is chaos and confusion. And that may well be how it feels to each of us today with the news as it is. But in Raphael's painting, amongst the chaos, two figures are seen visibly pointing up the mountain towards Jesus, towards the one who will not only be the saviour of the young boy, but also the saviour of the whole world: their pointing fingers are urging us to follow Jesus even amidst the chaos, and in a world where there may be many conflicting, troubling and distracting voices, those pointing fingers are urging us to focus on the Word that came to the disciples from above that day, "This is my son., my chosen one. Listen to him."

Reading Texts

Luke 9:23-43a

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. ³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹ Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he* shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.' ⁴¹ Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.' ⁴² While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astounded at the greatness of God.