

The Transfiguration ...

... there is more to this person than meets the eye

A sermon given on the Sunday next before Lent, 19th February 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 17:1-9

I recently heard about somebody who a number of years ago went to see the first of the films in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, the Fellowship of the Ring. But this person had never read the book, so when they were asked about the film afterwards, she said, "Well, I enjoyed the film, but the ending seemed a bit strange." And it had to be explained to her that the reason the ending was a bit strange was because it was only the ending of the first part of the trilogy. It's a bit like climbing a mountain, and you think you nearly made it to the summit, and then when you get there you discover it's a false summit, and the real summit is still much further away and higher up. And life is full of these little moments where we discover there's more to it than meets the eye. Sometimes we do that with people. I remember a boy in a school where I was a governor who was nothing but trouble. He never paid attention in class, never did his homework, was always getting into trouble, and the staff despaired of him. They thought he had no redeeming features. And then there was the school assembly, where students were invited to show off a special skill. And this boy brought in his unicycle - and it turned out he was a brilliant unicyclist, and he could perform all sorts of stunts, and nobody else in the school could even sit upright on it. And it changed people's perception of him. There was more to him than met the eye.

And in this morning's gospel reading, Peter, James and John discovered there is more to Jesus than meets the eye. They already knew he was special. They already knew they wanted to follow him and be with him, but they weren't expecting him to be transfigured before them, with his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming dazzling white. Jesus was shining out with the glory of God. In this particular human being, at this particular moment, in this particular place, the light and life of the eternal creator was being seen. In the Hindu tradition, there is the story of the infant Krishna, who is told by his mother to open his mouth so she can check whether he's been eating mud. And she looks in and she sees the whole universe in the dark interior of his throat. And on the mountain of the Transfiguration, the disciples see Jesus as the 'dwelling of light' - as the Book of Job puts it - radiating from his own person the pure and endless love of God. There is more to this man than meets the eye.

And this passage draws together threads from other parts of the Bible - Matthew tells us it takes place six days later, so on the threshold of the 7th day, the day when God completes his

creation and sees everything as it should be - and Jesus is there on the mountain with two other people who encountered the glory of God on a mountaintop - Moses and Elijah. And in both of those examples, the encounter with God came in the middle of a stressful history: Moses meets God on Sinai, having just led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and he's about to lead them deeper into the wilderness where they will wander around in circles for 40 years; Elijah meets God as a still small voice on Mount Horeb after having run for his life from Queen Jezebel - and God sends him back into the jaws of danger, in effect to launch a coup by anointing a new king. So Jesus is here placed alongside Moses and Elijah, those who discovered that meeting God on the mountaintop was no guarantee of a quiet life. And accompanying Jesus are Peter, James and John, that trio of disciples that we don't meet again in this particular combination until they are with Jesus on the night of his arrest in Gethsemane.

They were useless on the mountain with the blather about constructing dwellings, trying to confine God's glory in a tent. And they were useless in Gethsemane repeatedly falling asleep. But they saw Jesus's glory was real and they knew it was there in Gethsemane, even if they couldn't then see it. The point is that God's glory can be present in suffering. In John's gospel, God's glory is explicitly and repeatedly linked to the cross - it is when Jesus is lifted up that his glory will be revealed.

So as we gaze at Jesus, the Son of God, there is more to him than meets the eye, not simply in the revelation of God's glory and light, but the revelation of God's glory and light in the midst of a vocation to suffering and death. And what is true of Jesus the Son of God is potentially true of his followers, who are also the children of God. God's glory can be revealed through you and me also.

I once knew a lady who was given only three months to live. She was a lovely prayerful woman who reflected, radiated the love of God and the joy of the gospel. And during her last month she was worn out by the people who beat a path to her door to visit her on her deathbed because she made them all feel so much better for having seen her - people could see the glory of God in the midst of her trials.

The theologian Sam Wells says there are three kinds of prayer: there's the prayer of resurrection, when you pray for God to fix the problem - "Lord, heal me" - it's a common prayer and sometimes it's answered; then there's a prayer of incarnation - "Lord, be with me in whatever situation I'm facing" - that prayer is always answered, though we may not always realise it; but then there is the prayer of transfiguration - "Lord, reveal your glory through me, whatever it is I'm going through" - I suspect we don't often pray that particular prayer but when we do, it may be answered in proportion to our suffering.

And in that sense, Jesus's transfiguration may give meaning to you and to your struggles whatever it is you're facing: whether it's health; whether it's relationships; whether it's money; or good old-fashioned sin. May we pray that God's glory is revealed in us that others may say, "There is more to this person than meets the eye."

Reading Text

Matthew 17:1-9

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'