

Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-9

Key points of the story:

- Mountain
- Moses and Elijah
- Cloud
- Voice of God

Key events in Jewish history happen on mountains:

- Commandments given to Moses on Mt Sinai;
- Elijah received a commission from the Lord on Mount Sinai;
- Jesus crucified on the hill of Golgotha.

Jesus seen with Moses and Elijah. Key people in Jewish history of symbolic importance. Moses was the person to whom the law had been entrusted. He met God on Mount Sinai and brought down the tablets on which were written the ten commandments. This formed the basis of the relationship between God and his people. The Jews would keep the commandments and the Lord would be their god. And the five books that set out the history of that relationship became known as the Books of Moses. They formed the first part of the Christian Old Testament.

Elijah came many hundred years after Moses, in the time after David and Solomon, when the Kingdom had been split into two, Israel and Judah. He was the first and the greatest of the prophets. It was he who, when the Kings of Israel did wrong, attempted to rebuke them and suffered exile as a result. For him too the most significant encounter with God for him took place on Mount Sinai. He had fled from the city because he feared that the King Ahab and his queen Jezebel were trying to murder him. And as he hid from them on

Mount Sinai the voice of God spoke to him in a dreadful message: go back to where you came from.

As Moses came to represent the first part of the Old Testament, the Law or the Books of Moses, so Elijah came to represent the second part of the OT, the Prophets. Indeed in Jesus's time the scriptures were often referred to as The Law and the Prophets.

So, when Jesus is seen on a mountain with the two greatest authority figures in Jewish history, those looking on can come to only one conclusion: that Jesus ranked alongside both Moses and Elijah.

And that conclusion would be confirmed by the presence of the cloud. Moses had met The Lord on Mt Sinai in a cloud; God had filled the tabernacle with cloud; the cloud filled the Temple when it was dedicated. And Jews believed that when the Messiah came, the cloud would again fill the temple. So the obvious conclusion at seeing Jesus in the cloud with Moses and Elijah was that the Messiah had indeed come.

Mark also tells us that Jesus's clothes glowed, whiter than any earthly bleacher could bleach them. There was a widely accepted view among the Jewish people of that time that in the final state of glory we would glow, shine and this would include clothes (cf Enoch). There are hints of this in Paul's letter to the Philippians:

He will transfigure the body belonging to our humble state and give it a form like that of his own resplendent body

Phil 3:21

The vision of the transfiguration becomes an assurance that all will be well, that God really is in charge of the course of events and Jesus's life in particular.

And that was further confirmed by the voice that came from the cloud:

This is my son, the beloved; listen to him.

You may think you have heard those words before – and you would be right! They are exactly the same words as God spoke at Jesus's baptism, to mark the beginning of Jesus's ministry. Like the Transfiguration it was quite a high point; but the high point was followed immediately by a low point, for Jesus went from his baptism into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. And the affirmation of the transfiguration is followed by the even greater trial of the passion and crucifixion. Here, of course, the Christian calendar does not follow the events literally. If we did so the Baptism would be followed immediately by Lent, then would follow a gap and then would follow the transfiguration and the passion.

But the pattern is clear: that when God affirms Jesus, it is in preparation for a struggle, whether with Satan in the desert or with himself in the garden of Gethsemane. The mountain-top experience is followed by the valley. Indeed, the mountain top experience is necessary preparation for the valley bottom.

And perhaps the same is true for us. There are times when we have a strong sense of God's love, God's presence, even his affirmation. It is as if God says to us

You are my child, my beloved.

We are given that affirmation to prepare us for service, to prepare us to witness to God's love, to prepare us to change the world,. And we will need that affirmation because Christian service can be hard. The affirmation and the service cannot be separated; we cannot accept the affirmation without being willing to offer the service; but God does not require our service without giving us the affirmation.

But there is another darker side to the affirmation. There is someone who does not want us to rejoice in God's love – that someone is called Satan. Two weeks ago a member of the congregation at St Margaret's was confirmed. And in the vestry afterwards Bishop Toby gave her a warning: Satan will try to undermine the gift you have been given in Confirmation. He will tempt you to give up.

And in a sense that is what Lent is about. If we use this time to make a special effort to draw closer to God, Satan will work to subvert us. He will encourage quarrels and bickering in congregations, he will encourage despair and lethargy in individuals. He will try to tempt us just as he tried to tempt Jesus. But when we are in that valley we can look up the hills on either side: the hill of the transfiguration and the hill of Golgotha where Jesus defeated Satan. And we will be assured that Christ is triumphant, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

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