

Sermon Feast of the Transfiguration Year A 2017

For the ancient Celts, heaven and earth was only three feet apart. But on certain days of the year and at certain places on the landscape that distance became even shorter and were known as ‘thin places.’ The Celtic imagination was very sensitive to the idea that the earthly realm and the heavenly realm were very close, that there was a constant overlap between the material and the spiritual. But in the thin place the distance between heaven and earth appeared to collapse. They were, as one writer has described, "the places in the world where the walls are weak". Now, these may be traditionally religious places, and more especially places of pilgrimage. In such places often it will seem as though heaven has indeed broken through. But a thin place needn't be a religious place. For the ancients, it was often perceived in liminal, in-between places: thresholds and doorways and bridges. The great standing stones and stone circles that mark the landscape of Britain bear witness to this.

Such experiences of course were not limited to the ancients. It is not at all unusual for people to recount powerfully moving experiences from the most ordinary and mundane, perhaps listening to a piece of music, a walk in nature, a key family moment, pondering a work of art. I suspect that some of you here may well have experienced something like this. Now, a thin place is not necessarily a tranquil place, or a fun one, or even a beautiful one, though they may be. They may relax us, yes. But critically they also *transform* us – or, more accurately, unmask us. In thin places, we become our more essential selves. We become aware that a larger, more true story is unfolding in, and around and through us. It's when we feel that another reality – a more *real* reality – is pressing in against us. It's the territory of the ineffable: the stuff we can't easily express. Explanations aren't merely useless; they threaten to get in the way. The experience of a thin place feels special *because* words fail, leaving a stunned silence.

In the biblical imagination mountains frequently serve as a ‘thin place’. In fact, mountains for many faith traditions are that place of intersection between heaven and earth. But in the biblical tradition mountains have a singular place of privilege as the place of divine encounter. Today's feast of the Transfiguration really is the celebration of the thin veil between time and eternity being drawn back for a moment. The veil between time and eternity, heaven and earth, is drawn back and Christ is seen as he truly is.

For all the synoptic gospel writers – Matthew Mark and Luke – this clearly is an incident of great significance. All of them report it. For all of them it's key in helping answer the critical question all the gospel writers are seeking to address: *who is Jesus and why should we listen to him, follow him?* For Matthew, he lines up an impressive arsenal so that the readers of his community would sit up, take note, be both moved and impressed by the account he presents; so that our response may be something of stunned silence. As Matthew tells it, the account is so thick with meaning it is hard to know where to look or what to take it. It all works to leave an overwhelming impression, and that surely is Matthew's intent: to be so overwhelmed by the detail and the context that we that we are left awestruck.

In fact, the entire account is cast against so dense a back ground that it becomes one of the most striking and strident affirmations of the person of Jesus Christ. This dense Old Testament background of course looks to the mountains of Sinai, of Horeb, Moriah, the mountains of Old Testament revelation: those ‘thin places’ places of old. We are likewise to keep in mind the mountains of Jesus' own life: the mountain of temptation; the mountain of his great preaching; the mountain of his prayer;

Gethsemane, the mountain of his agony; Calvary, the mountain of his cross; and finally, Matthew tells us it is on a mountain in Galilee where the Risen Lord declares, *all power in heaven and earth has been given to me, go therefore and baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. The account though also looks to the figures of Moses and Elijah – embodying the law and prophets - which for the gospel writers are fulfilled in Jesus. It is not accidental that Moses and Elijah both had key mountain-top experiences: Moses receiving the law and establishing God's covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai. Elijah, hearing the still small voice on the side of Mount Moriah. But that Jesus is seen to be *speaking* to them highlights his connection, his familiarity to the heavenly world, as does his radiance, his shining face. The white garments – according to apocalyptic writings – also speaks symbolically of heavenly beings.

But the mountain is not only the place of divine encounter. In the Old Testament tradition, it is also the place of sacrifice. It is Isaac, the well-beloved son, who is led up the mountain to be sacrificed. *Immediately* before the story of the Transfiguration comes Jesus' prediction of his coming passion and death. And Jesus tells his disciples that if any wished to follow him they too must take up their cross. So, when the voice of the cloud interrupts Peter – *while he was still speaking* – that is what we are meant to be listening to. That is what we are supposed to be taking notice of. Even as the glory of Jesus is revealed, even as *he* is affirmed as God's well-beloved son, his true identity is incomplete without the cross. It is on the cross Jesus completes God's self-revelation. It is on the cross - Jesus hanging mid-air - that he becomes the true icon of the meeting between heaven and earth. On the mountain, we may witness the divine for a moment. But it is the cross that is the eternal sign of God breaking into our world.

All of this is woven -crammed - into just 9 verses! Matthew layers it on thick so we hardly know where to look. It leaves us with an impression that something special is going on here; that ordinary categories are so stretched that everything is thrown at it to make sense of it. Yes. When we encounter the divine, it is hard to make sense of it, to find an appropriate response. But it doesn't stop Peter trying though! His stammering response is reported in an almost comical manner; a rare example of humour used by the evangelists: it's such an inappropriate response. The point though is that it is a *stammer* before the Mystery, and in *that* sense entirely appropriate.

This is where run hard against some of the key paradoxes of our faith: that at once we affirm God as both transcendent and immanent; above us and with us; Christ who is the Lord of glory but also the Man of Calvary; that even as we stammer before the Mystery, Christ raises us up, tells us not to be afraid and leads us down the mountain. All these we must hold in tension. As catholic Christians, we affirm that in our worship the thin veil between time and eternity is drawn back. But we must never allow it to become too tame, too familiar or that we approach it casually or indifferently. There must always be room for stunned awe. While Peter, James and John were granted the privilege of glimpsing Christ's eternal dignity as the well-beloved son rightly leaving them overcome - stunned - they cannot stay, they must descend. Peter's tents cannot be built. All thin places are temporary, ephemeral. Christian life and faith is always anchored in the real world. We are not escapists. Christian life and faith is always anchored in the cross – even as we keep before us the hope and promise of glory. If we just want a quiet life and a nice show on Sunday, we're going to be disappointed. The gospel hammers home hard the point: its costly to follow Jesus, and he ought to leave us trembling. If we want to know Christ, if we wish to encounter him, if we wish to see him as he really is, we will get more than we bargained for. Amen.