

Sermon Evensong Feast of the Transfiguration 2023

The second reading placed before us tonight for this Feast of the Transfiguration was taken from the gospel of Mark. Both Matthew and Luke also note this story. In Mark's version, this key moment from the life of Our Lord is told in an incredibly dense manner. Only seven verses are given over to the account. Because it is so dense with meaning we barely know where to look. The effect being to dazzle us.

The density of the account itself, in a way, reflects the very heart of what is going on here. The Transfiguration *is* overwhelming. It *is* mysterious. Because of the strangeness of it all, we rightly avert our eyes. It is like when someone unexpectedly turns on the bedroom light in the middle of the night. Or again, in the middle of the night, when your mobile phone beeps, or ring or buzzes and you fumble to look, and the brightness of the screen affronts your eyes. Or perhaps on a road, again at night, and the full-beam headlights of an oncoming car comes your way from around the corner. It is blinding. Dazzling. Dangerous, in fact. For we reason we speak of 'blinding light.' *Though there is full light, we cannot see.*

The dazzling effect of bright light is exactly what the mystery of the Transfiguration recalls. And this is conveyed in a number of surprising ways. Or at least ways that invite us to look past the surface of things, so to speak. On the surface, Christ's very transfiguration, his changing, is the key image of this scene: *and his clothes became dazzling white*. The evangelist recognizes that there is an *other-worldly* quality to this dazzling white. *A whiteness such as no one on earth could bleach them*. In other words, the veil over Christ's humanity has for a moment been partially drawn back, and he is shown to be not simply a man, even the perfect man. He is the heavenly man.

This exact point is emphasized by the very setting of this whole scene: the mountain. Now, mountains in so many of the world's religions are a liminal place, a 'thin' place between heaven and earth. In the biblical imagination, mountains are a *privileged* place of encounter with God. The mountain Jesus ascends with Peter James and John, of course, looks to the mountains of the Old Testament, of Sinai, of Horeb, and Moriah, the mountains of Old Testament revelation. But 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.

It is not accidental, either, that Moses and Elijah both had key mountain-top experiences: Moses receiving the law and establishing God's covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai. In the book of Exodus, we are told that when Moses ascends Mt Sinai to meet with God, the mountain is surrounded by thunder and lightning and thick cloud. And Elijah, the great prophet of Israel, hears *the still small voice* on the side of Mount Moriah. That Jesus is seen to be speaking to them again highlights his connection, his familiarity with the heavenly world, as does his radiance, his shining face.

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. And so, 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.

And if this was not all too blinding and dazzling and brilliant enough, to confirm all this - to confirm Christ's destiny, his identity as fulfillment and promise, his identity as sacrifice and heavenly man - the voice coming from the cloud, *This is my son the beloved listen to him*. The cloud simply speaks to the truth that though there is full, bright light, we cannot see.

These shafts of brilliance might indeed unnerve us. We can feel the evangelist stammering to adequately describe the mystery. Like Peter himself in his strange response to what he witnesses, *Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*. The sense we are to make of this peculiar comment really comes from the evangelist himself. *He did not know what to say, for they were terrified*. Peter is simply babbling. He sees but is blinded. When the faculties are flooded - as they are in extraordinary experiences - we often say things that make no sense.

When we consider the mystery and person of Christ it is very easy to think of him in safe and familiar terms. Oftentimes we try to tame Christ, to domesticate him. But such a Christ does not so much challenge and call us as to 'affirm' us. He confirms our likes, our interests, and wondrously aligns with our current agendas! But such a Christ offers only dim, cold light. But the mystery we celebrate tonight reminds us that Christ is not tame. He defies our knowledge and experiences. He is dazzling, blinding light. And the proper response before him is to fall down in stunned awe. Amen.