

**Sermon preached on Second Sunday of Lent 2018
at St John's Church Timberhill, Norwich
by Fr Christopher Wood**

St Mark 9, chapter 9. The Transfiguration

You might think that now we are in Lent our Gospel readings would all point to the relentless and agonizing journey to the darkness of the cross. Last week Our Lord was in the desert, caught up it seems in his own Wilderness experience, contemplating his future journey that would lead up that hill to Calvary. But to-day.....LIGHT

We have listened to a mystery. A revelation, not of the agony and the pain, but of the Glory of God that has been revealed to us in this brief and beautiful account of the Transfiguration, and you might say it's bewildering.

Transfiguration. The Greek word is metamorphosis.

It's a transforming of reality, a revealing of the glory of the human Christ and a manifestation of his inner divinity. Here is a glimpse of the implication of the resurrection to come, the triumph of the eternal over the trials of this world. It has always fascinated Christians. It is so important an event it has its own feast at the beginning of August.

Yet the older and original place for this reading, here in Lent, as a preparation for what is to come, is absolutely, the right place. And here it still has the opportunity to influence this season that we should grasp for all its significance.

Some theologians believe this account is a resurrection appearance of Our Lord that has got into the wrong place. That surely must be mistaken. That sort of speculation reveals a weakness of faith in the face of an event which is utterly extraordinary and therefore difficult for the rational mind.

It also misses the intended deep significance of what was actually going on.

The modern world is more comfortable with Christ as a wise ancient sage, a sort of Buddha figure. We come here because we believe there is more to it than that.

With the Transfiguration, we come to a mysterious event that is central to Christ's earthly ministry. It directs our attention to his divinity shining through his humanity and it points forward to the meaning of Holy Week and Easter; to the mystery of the impact of the Cross and the Resurrection beyond.

It is a mirror in which we see the true Christ revealed and the possibility of our final union with Christ in God. It is here, as we begin to journey through Lent, raising our eyes from the earthly round of our daily life, and giving us confidence, hope, possibilities, as we prepare to travel with Christ, that agonizing journey, the way of the cross.

That is what Christ was offering to his closest followers, a glimpse of something that would strengthen them; an inner light, that would make bearable the events to come.

It must have been a strikingly beautiful scene. The sort of beauty that emerges from woundedness, rather than the beauty of a person or a landscape. The desolation from that wilderness experience right through to the ultimate agony that is to come are here reflected back like unbearable light, almost like music. Most woundedness simply gets buried, remains hidden. In every life there is a wound that continues to weep in silence, even after years of attempted healing. But where woundedness can be refined into the beauty of faith, faith in that glory beyond the horizon, a wonderful transfiguration takes place. I believe that. That is the heart of the meaning of what the apostles saw that day.

The apostles aren't really aware of what it is they're seeing. That's obvious even from St Mark's brief version of this event. How could they be? They have accompanied Our Lord to a place where suddenly his humanity has opened up to its inner depth and his unique nature has shone before them; The apostles are aware of God's presence even in their fear and bewilderment, because it is their faith in that presence revealed in to-days Gospel that is to sustain them in the days to come. But it has no magical power over them, and this we know by what is to come; or as the poet W H Auden put it: "Christ did not enchant men; For a brief while, Peter, James, and John were permitted to see Him in His glory. For that brief while this reality meant they had no need of faith. The vision vanished,..... and the memory of it didn't prevent them from all forsaking Him when He was arrested, or Peter from denying that he had ever known Him."

From here on, the Gospel is infused with the powerful shadow of the cross. It will be unbearable, painful, in the way that life and death can be unbearable and painful. But through the pain of life's journey God is revealing here a special truth. He is illuminating, like a light going on in the brain the realization that his presence is a reality and that our destiny is ultimately with Him.

True belief in Jesus Christ is seeing him in that new light, an inner light, the light of faith. In Him we see a gateway into God's love. It's like looking into a deep well and seeing life and truth and the freedom that St Paul talks about reflected back at us.

It is also a challenge. Knowing that to get to the glory we have glimpsed we may have to travel with Christ through the heart of darkness.....We may never be the same. The Holy Spirit may see to that.

Pope Francis has a reasonable insight into human nature in his view of this event. He says:

“To put it simply: the Holy Spirit bothers us. Because he moves us, he makes us walk, he pushes the Church to go forward. And we are like Peter at the Transfiguration: 'Ah, how wonderful it is to be here like this, all together!' ... But don't bother us. We want the Holy Spirit to doze off ... we want to domesticate the Holy Spirit. And that's no good, because he is God, he is that wind which comes and goes and you don't know where. He is the power of God, he is the one who gives us strength to move forward. But: to move forward! This bothers us. It's so much nicer to be comfortable.”

He's right. If we grasp the meaning of our faith, our life.....we must do something. Our lives may have meanings we cannot know about in the present moment. The real depth and significance of what we say or do now, won't appear until more of the light of Christ has been seen. What we think is crucially important may not be so. What we think of as insignificant may be what really changes us : What is of lasting worth.

Christ and his light alone will make the final sense, make life clear, for us and for the history of humanity. And for now we are being asked to get ready, to be strengthened to accompany Him through this Lent's journey. We might not understand it all or be attentive to it all. But God is in it all and that is the same in our daily lives.

Faith in Christ means living in the world with all its risks but with our lives open to the Spirit, just like that of Our Blessed Lady, from the Magnificat to the foot of the cross, open to the depths from which Christ can ultimately show us what really matters to God, so that we can become God's agents of Transfigurationto others. Disciples, which is a vocation that we all share. So: Look, listen; Talk to God this Lent.....and may your face shine.

Amen