

our true identity
a sermon preached on the
last Sunday before Lent
15 February 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lection: Mark 9:2-13

On the Last Sunday before Lent we always read one of the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration. This fact tells us that the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain is important preparation for the 40 days of Lent. We do not know with any precision what the historical event was. But sacred scripture is not merely history anyway. So, today's story is not just about this particular and unique 'Son of God' – but about all daughters and sons of God, you and me, and all humankind. It's a story about universal human experience.

Grasping this crucial spiritual fact makes all the difference – between religion being something we read about, something merely outside of ourselves; and something which we experience, something wholly native to being human. It's the difference between trying to make ourselves believe in impossible things; and actually undergoing transfiguration.

Yes, there is an outer, historic reality, and there are church teachings worthy of our attention and study, of course. Today's gospel story is the making known – to Peter, James and John, at least – of Jesus' true identity. He is not just a good man, a great teacher, and a healer – he is the very embodiment of God in God's-self. In Mark's gospel this fact is declared three times – at Jesus' baptism¹; in today's episode; and when Jesus breathed his last on the cross² – this is none other than the Son of God!

But the church has tended to get stuck on that point as an external – expending a great deal of energy defending this as dogma, as an idea. And it's really not much use to the world that a community of people simply believe in such an idea. Indeed, believing in ideas without actually embodying them is positively dangerous – a fact anyone with any honesty and humility can observe, and which drives many from the churches.

This Last Sunday before Lent gives us this story of transfiguration to recall us – each year – to the fact that *we* are to undergo and embody ourselves transfiguration. The 40 days of Lent are the gift of a time and a space for ascending the spiritual mountain – for going apart by ourselves³; that we may be liberated from all the false identities that market-consumer culture sells us, and come to know our true spiritual identity; that we may be overshadowed by the same Divine Spirit who overshadowed Jesus, and Mary, and the whole creation; that we may know ourselves to be truly daughters and sons of God.

And the story reminds us that – if we do manage to withdraw from all the distractions and entertainments and busyness we think to be so important – we *will* experience the Divine presence, we *will* know ourselves to be truly daughters and sons of God.

There's also something else here which doesn't feel quite so good. Like Peter, we will probably also want to set our experience in some literal, concrete form.⁴ And like him we will have to descend instead into the valley of life – and suffer the loss of all concrete literal forms in the ashes of ordinary day-to-day reality. And, like the first disciples, our experience will only be truly liberating and creative when it is understood in the light of crucifixion-resurrection.⁵ The problem with wanting to stay on top of the mountain and make concrete forms is the religion of prosperity, success, and power. The disciples are told to tell no one about their experience because they will fall for this old trap – and only by undergoing their own dying and rising will they be liberated from it.

¹ Mark 1:11
² Mark 15:39
³ Mark 9:2
⁴ Mark 9:5
⁵ Mark 9:9

Our liturgy today concludes with the draining and sealing of the font and the burning of last year's palm crosses. The Transfiguration gospel and these simple yet profound ritual actions beckon us into the Lenten pilgrimage: to go apart by ourselves; to make space and time for encounter with the Holy One; to re-focus on our baptism; to listen for the Divine voice; to hear our true name and true identity; to be purified by fire and Spirit; to die and rise, to be transfigured by the Paschal Mystery; to become what we eat, to become *ourselves* the Eucharistic sacrifice.

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