

transfiguration
a sermon preached on the
last sunday before lent

26 February 2017

at

st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by bishop genieve blackwell

the lection: Matthew 17:1-9

It is good to be present with you today for worship, together with Father David and Reverend Kun. I know the last couple of months have been difficult and challenging. Our gospel today of the Transfiguration speaks into such times I think.

Just prior to our gospel today of the Transfiguration, Jesus has said he must go to Jerusalem. It will be a long and lonely way, as the disciples will not be good at following him.

Jesus is reminded of the great Moses and how he persisted, sent by God to be in the midst of a people that didn't understand. And where did the prophet Elijah get the power from to accomplish his task? Jesus lifted up his eyes to the hills. Where would his help come from?

Six days later

Jesus waits six days – maybe this is like a new Genesis 1 and Genesis 3 – a hint of redemption, a hint of new creation. Jesus waits six days and on the seventh Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

This must be Moses' mountain, the mountain where heaven and earth touch. Moses met God there as we heard in our reading from Exodus (Exodus 24:15-18). After that Moses went down again, with God's holy law, in his hand. He shone. His face radiated such heavenly light that he had to veil himself when he approached the people who were waiting for him down below (Exodus 31).

This mountain is also Elijah the prophet's mountain. Where Elijah sought his salvation on the heights in an hour of desperation. And God also revealed himself to Elijah there, in the silence (1 Kings 19).

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Jesus has gone up to the mountain. He is seeking to be near God. And look, Elijah and Moses, his shining examples, appear to him. They appear to him because he so wants them. He has summoned them in effect.

Since childhood he has been in conversation with them – with the Law and the Prophets. Think of Jesus as a child in the Temple. Wherever he went, people were reminded of Moses and Elijah. 'Moses is again in our midst'; 'Elijah has returned'. Now they appear to Jesus on the mountain of God. As if God his Father had sent them to strengthen him.

Moses is there to put heart into him. He died in sight of the promised land, and there the Lord buried him with his own hands. Like a mother, God had pity on him and covered him, and no one to the present day knows where his grave is. He is safe with God.

Elijah is there to strengthen him. He went up to heaven in a fiery chariot, borne up by the breath of the Lord. He too is safe with God.

Jesus is transfigured when he sees their familiar faces. His face shines like the sun – it beams. Suffering and death awaits him, but on this mountain it is already Easter. Jesus knows that he should persevere, like Moses and Elijah before him. His garments will be drenched with blood, but in God's glory they will be dazzling white.

A vision. A peak experience. The Torah, the Prophets and the Gospel meet. Time no longer counts; the clock stands still – eternity.

And Peter wants to perpetuate this heavenly scene. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I[a] will make three dwellings[b] here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He just says the first thing that comes into his head. But while he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved;[c] with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

This is the voice with which it all began on the bank of the Jordan, the voice which Jesus heard when he was being baptized: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Now the voice addresses his followers. Confirming what Peter had said in the previous chapter. Jesus is not just a prophet. He is God's own son, the Messiah and God is delighted with what he is doing.

Towards the end of Moses' life, God promised to send the people a prophet just like him (Deuteronomy 18). And gave the command: you must listen to him. Now as Moses once again meets God on the mountain, the voice from the cloud draws attention to Jesus. Anyone who wants to hear God must listen to his Son. Just like his Father.

Memory is a great antidote to temptation. It can be a great inspiration. As St John's Camberwell looks to its future – its ministry and mission, as this congregation grows and develops in its ministry and mission.

As all of us enter now afresh the seasons of Lent through Easter to Pentecost. whatever mountain you have to climb in the coming 100 days, whatever words you have to hear, remember where you came from and where you are going. Remember how the thunder sounded. You must listen. Remember you are a beloved child of God.

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. Awe, yes. And they are afraid this beautiful dream will come to an end, they are afraid to go to Jerusalem.

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid". And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. They are not to build tents on the mountain. They have to go back to the valley. Jesus will pursue his way and they are to follow.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead". What it means to say Jesus is God's Son, that Jesus is the Messiah will only gradually be disclosed. It can only really be understood in the light of the cross. Here on a mountain Jesus is revealed in glory. There on a hill outside Jerusalem Jesus is revealed in shame.

Here on the mountain his clothes are shining white; at the cross they have been stripped off and soldiers have gambled for them. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest heroes. There he is flanked by two brigands,

representing the level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God. A bright cloud on the mountain; there darkness over the land.

Here Peter saying how wonderful it all is. There he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. On the mountain a voice from God himself declaring this is my son; at the cross, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God's son (Matthew 27:33-54).

The mountain-top explains the hill-top – and vice versa. Perhaps we only really understand either of them when we see them side by side. Perhaps we only really understand then what it meant for Jesus to become poor, taking the form of a servant.

The word to the disciples then is just as much a word to us today. If you want to find the way – the way to God, the way to the promised land – your ministry and mission – if you want to find the way to flourish, you must listen to him.

In this gospel of the Transfiguration, as you begin your service, as we enter the season of Lent, be surprised by the power, love and beauty of God. And listen also to the voice of Jesus. Recognize that same power, love and beauty within Jesus not least when he tells us to take up the cross and follow him.

Listen to him.