

on the mountain top

a sermon preached on the

second sunday in lent

25 February 2018

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father ken hewlett

the lections: Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 121; Romans 4: 13-25; Mark 9:2-9

Today's gospel reading recalls for us that strange story of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. We are told that Jesus goes up the mountain with Peter, James and John and is transfigured before them. This is a mountain top story in which the key disciples have some kind of mysterious and powerful experience of God's presence which both confirms and strengthens their faith. What are we to make of it? It is not possible to get behind the story to what actually happened and it is pointless to try. So instead of asking what happened, let us explore a very different question. Why does Mark tell this story like he tells it and where he tells it?

We need to firstly take note where this story occurs in Mark's long narrative. It begins with the words, 'six days later'. One of the very noticeable things about the gospels is that on the whole they are very vague about dates and times; very little is said which would help us fix the date of the many events or stores that are mentioned. But this one is different, 'Six days later', we are told precisely, Jesus took the three of them up the mountain. 'Six days later than what?' is therefore the obvious question to ask.

The answer is six days after the crucial conversation at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus had taken the disciples away from their usual haunts in Galilee to be alone together. He asked them what people were making of him. They told him and then he turned the question onto them, 'But who do you think I am?' Peter had eventually answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Christ' (Mk 8.29). Then Jesus had told them to tell no one else about this and then confused them completely by saying that as the Messiah he must go up to Jerusalem, be rejected, suffer and die. It was six days after this that Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain.

On the mountain six days later as Mark tells it, Peter is proved right. There he shares an experience, which confirms his faith. Mark links the two things quite deliberately: first the faith, the decision; and then the proof, the confirmation. This sequence is of course the opposite way round from the way we would prefer it. We ask for proof, or if not proof then for good evidence on which to make up our minds. When we can know it or feel it, then we will believe it. Mark teaches us here that that is the wrong way round: God asks us first for faith, then, afterwards comes its confirmation. Caesarea Philippi comes before the Mount of Transfiguration – for Peter and his discipleship and for us and ours. That is one key point Mark is making.

The mountain top experience is in itself indescribable. Mark tried hard, using some traditional Hebrew Scripture metaphors about mountains and clouds, but what is he talking about can't really be described. Was it a dream? Was it a hallucination? We can't say. But in his story telling Mark insists that Peter, James and John had an experience of God's presence, which sent them on their way strengthened and encouraged. It was a magic and precious moment, which Mark portrays as a glimpse into the real world, when, for just a moment the three were allowed to see things as they really are. Now, that of course, is not how we normally think either. We have been trained to think that the only things which are real are those which we can touch or see or hear or taste and that what cannot be seen or touched cannot be proved and cannot be real, and though many today have seen the weakness of that position it is still very much part of how we see things. Mark believes it is the other way round. Perhaps this comes home to us best at a Christian funeral, when we rejoice that someone has entered their reward and have now begun to live their real and true life. It is not as if they have passed from life to death, but the other way round, they have passed from this world of passing shadows [however glorious] to the real and true world. On the Mount of

Transfiguration the three are allowed a momentary glimpse of the way things really are. They see the glory of God.

Then the story ends. They can't stay on the mountain. They must go down. In the words of J. Armitage Robinson's Transfiguration hymn:

‘ ‘Tis good, Lord be here!
Yet we may not remain;
But since thou bidst us leave the mount
Come with us to the plain’

In the language of the past the hymn reminds us that although we might have ‘mountain top experiences’ in our Christian lives they are rare! They are the exception not the rule. When they come we must thank God for them and consider ourselves blessed: but they are exceptional, unusual. And that is what many people today do not want to hear either, in this age spiritual industry and the post-modern stress on feelings and experience. Mark thinks differently. He knows that most of our life is lived on the plain, in the ordinary and the humdrum, and that it is there where our discipleship has to be lived out. In his story the disciples are often puzzled by Jesus, and sometimes amazed or afraid of him: but only once – here – does he speak of them having a heart warming and faith confirming experience of the presence of God. Only once; but once is enough.

Then it was back down the mountain for Jesus, Peter, James and John and back down to a problem straight away, for a crowd met them accompanying a father who had wanted the nine disciples to heal his son but they had not been able to do so. After that it was back to following Jesus, following him on the way up to Jerusalem with an uncertain future before them. Their faith had been tested at Caesarea Philippi and confirmed on the mountain but now it was back to their daily walking with Jesus.

‘Six day later, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain where they were alone. As they looked on a change came over Jesus and his clothes became shining dazzling white.’ The disciples didn't believe because of this mountain top experience, Mark tells us, and neither did they seek it after they believed, neither therefore should we. St. Paul might say that for a moment they saw the ‘light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’, as we have done [2Cor4.6]. And that was enough. Thanks be to God, that such glimpses are still given to us, and that they are still enough.