

transfixed or transfigured?

a sermon preached on the
feast of the transfiguration of our lord

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the lections: Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14; Psalm 97; 2 Peter 1:16-19; Mark 9:2-10

The whole of Mark's gospel record is built upon three pillars that recognise Jesus as Son of God. The first pillar is at his baptism, the second at his transfiguration and the third at the cross as the centurion recognises Jesus for who he is: Son of God!

Some of the biblical commentators believe that the Transfiguration is a post resurrection experience, an appearance of the risen Christ to the three disciples, Peter, James and John. But Mark places the Transfiguration in the life of Jesus, and weaves a strong thread through his gospel to hold it there securely. His weaving begins with our Lord's baptism with the vision of the heavenly dove and God's voice proclaiming Jesus 'my Son, the Beloved' [1.10b-11].

Mark's thread catches up Peter's confession that Jesus is Messiah-Christ six days before the Transfiguration, and the disclosure is clear that being Messiah means suffering. Then this scene: Jesus in dazzling white robes, Moses and Elijah nearby, and again the call of God, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' [9.7b]. Mark's thread continues through Jesus' trial to his crucifixion where Mark knots off the thread with the pagan centurion saying 'Truly this man was God's son!' [15:9]. Scene after scene, image after image, of power and glory but also of betrayal and suffering—the lot of the Messiah, the Christ.

For Peter, James and John the Transfiguration experience was a high moment though they did not recognise that. Mark shows us them as afraid and confused. They hadn't understood Jesus' teaching of discipleship as suffering servant. Peter had enthusiastically acknowledged Jesus as Messiah but tried to silence talk of suffering and death; Peter rebuked Jesus and was rebuked in turn [8:32-33]. Mark later describes James and John, not discussing how as disciples they would serve the people, but wrangling over who would be the greatest in the expected glorious Messiah's kingdom [10:35-37]. And finally, Mark tells us, all three fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane, oblivious to the agony of their friend and teacher while he awaited arrest and execution [14:3-41]. And yet these are the three who witnessed the extraordinary high moment of Jesus's Transfiguration, who heard a voice telling them, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'

High moments and lost opportunities for insight. They are all there in our lives. It is a rare soul who does not miss these moments, who look into the face of God in a glimpse of time and be transfigured. There is an old story of a monk lying dying with a young novice by his bedside who asked the old monk about the secret of his peace. The old monk replied, 'I met God once – I have been waiting for another meeting since'. The old monk had lived out his life of grace with a shining remembrance of the encounter.

Peter however was not such an insightful soul. A high moment of glimpsing the face of God did not transfigure him. He was undone by fear not transformed by awe. And so he bumbled on about how jolly it all was. 'Let us make ourselves comfortable, with tents for you three and so on.' Poor Peter – he might have been organizing a picnic. He did not know what to say – Mark apologises for them: 'they were terrified'.

Peter was trying to make the shining moment permanent! But when we do that we are not transfigured. We are transfixed. There are two ways we react to high moments in life. We can live in them. Or we can live out of them. When we live in them we are like Peter – we hold onto the image,

transfixed by the beauty, trying to control it and make the high moment permanent. That was what Peter's talk about tents was all about. On the other hand when we live out of the high moments we are not enslaved. We can move onto the next moment because of the hope that shone in the first. Then we are like the old monk living out of the shining of the remembered day when he had encountered God.

When we get stuck in the memory of the high moments, it isn't that we are not stirred by God. Often we are and we want to shout about it. We speak of wanting to crystallize moments in time but in fact we bury them in blind cement where the flashing lights of crystal do not shine. Then we are frozen like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. There is a real danger of this frozenness for Christians. The whole story of who we are is grounded in 'the shining of remembered days' – the days of Jesus. Whenever we say this is our tradition or this is what we believe or this is who we are or this is the way it has always been done we are in danger. In danger of locking ourselves into ideas or patterns descended from the shining high moments of remembered days but which might now be outmoded or irrelevant. We stunt ourselves spiritually if fights to retain favoured rituals or practices mean we miss the potential of the future, or fail to hear in the Transfiguration story God's call to life: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'

Part of the problem is fear, as it was for Peter. Part is trying to avoid suffering. As it was for the young novice monk. But we can escape neither fear nor suffering. As Paul would say 'I see through a glass darkly' [1 Cor.13;12]. So it is with the cross and its shadow across the world. Mark's Transfiguration story does not allow us to forget that the glory of the Easter Christ and suffering of the Good Friday Jesus are inseparable.

It is easy for us to see the face of God in the glory stories of the Risen Christ. Easy to be transfixed. Much tougher to be transfigured by facing the cross's reminder of how we encounter God's face in the world. As the crucified suffering one in the faces of the lost, despised, homeless and helpless ones. Peter, James and John didn't want to see that; neither do we. But that is the task; to gaze on the suffering face of God, the man Jesus, who died on a dark Good Friday 2000 odd years ago that we might live out of the hope of the high moments. May God's call 'this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' come to us from the shining of both a remembered dark day of death and a remembered Easter Day of glory. And, like the old monk and like the Roman centurion, may we be transfigured.