



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Sunday Next Before Lent 2022 Year C

2 Corinthians 3.12 - 4.2

Luke 9. 28-36 [37-43a]

The Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus is on August 6th. This is the gospel reading set for today. I vividly remember being on holiday in Dorset one year; we went to our friends' cottage each year so the villagers knew us well. We became friendly with the priest who was one of the first women to be ordained and a great inspiration to me. Imagine my horror though while sitting in church one Sunday to suddenly be asked if I would like to comment on the Transfiguration! An account of the event appears in all the synoptic gospels and it is referred to in 2 Peter 1.16-18. The readings are closely linked this week and I found it very helpful to look at the Old Testament reading Exodus 34. 29-35, certainly this background helps with the understanding of the Corinthians passage in particular because it is to this that St. Paul is referring.

Last time we looked at the stilling of the storm by Jesus and his power over the natural elements and by extension the whole cosmos because he is co-creator. We have moved on now and Jesus has already sent out the twelve on mission. Our gospel reading for today begins '28 Now about eight days after these sayings' it is very important to understand just what had happened previously.

^{9.18} 'Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' ¹⁹They answered, 'John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.'

It is important to bear in mind the belief that Elijah would appear before the coming of the Messiah. Jesus' next question gets right to the heart of the matter. These men are his chosen band, they are his followers, they have heard his teaching and they have seen the signs he has performed, now there follows the soul searching question,

‘But who do you say that I am?’

It is Peter who answers with huge insight, ‘The Messiah of God.’ That is it, the truth is out. This is no other than the anointed son of David, the one foretold by the prophets, the saviour of Israel and the world. This is he who will rule God’s perfected creation. Jesus’ words are interesting,²¹ ‘He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone,’ why? because opposition to Jesus is becoming vocal, the rulers and leaders of the religious groups are looking for ways to trap him, the storm clouds are gathering but the time is not yet ripe. Jesus has much to do to fulfil his Father’s work. He knows exactly what will happen however and he reveals it now.

²²‘The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’

This is the way of the cross, the death he must die to accomplish his mission to save humanity. He will conquer sin and death at his resurrection. Anyone one who wants to follow him must be prepared to walk the way of suffering, ‘to deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. ‘

His next words speak of the glory of God and himself as part of that glory,

²⁶ ‘Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.’

None of this is preamble, Luke means his readers to understand this before the account of the transfiguration and the revelation of that glory.

²⁸ ‘Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.’

We are not told which mountain this is, maybe Mount Hermon or Mount Tabor, metaphorically Jesus has already taken the disciples up the mountain of understanding, Peter has already climbed his own mountain of insight. Now quite literally Jesus takes these chosen ones up the mountain to pray. Notice it is the same three who are with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. The others are left below. Notice too this detail which Luke stresses, ³² ‘Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep;’ exactly the same as in the garden. This time they do not sleep however and they witness the amazing event,

²⁹ ‘And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.’³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.’

The shining of his face is reminiscent of Moses when he has been in God’s presence; the shining clothes reveal Jesus’ glory.

There on the mountain two figures appear with Jesus, Moses and Elijah who was said to appear before the coming of God’s Messiah, Elijah was the greatest of the prophets and here represents them. Moses was the law giver, who by God’s hand; led the people to freedom in the Promised Land. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets who will free his people from the slavery of sin. Jesus is seen as dazzling white with his Father’s glory.

Now we are taken back to Jesus’ words to the disciples about his passion.

³¹ 'They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.'

Here they speak of Jesus' path to Calvary, but it is a fulfilment, this is the path he is destined to tread in obedience to his Father to accomplish his saving destiny. It is Jesus who will carry the weight of sin and evil and vanquish it. All this is an affirmation of who Jesus is. Typically it is Peter who breaks into this scene bumbling out well-intentioned but wholly inappropriate words and wanting to hold the moment.

³³ 'Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. '

This affirmation is underlined as the cloud encloses them all. We are told in Exodus 34:

⁵'The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The Lord.'

Here on the mount of the transfiguration the cloud engulfs them all.

'and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.'

This always reminds me of the shepherds on the hills above Bethlehem,

^{2.9}'Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.'

As the disciples become enveloped in the cloud they hear the voice,

^{9.35} 'Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'

This is the voice of God; it takes us back to Jesus' baptism, (Matthew 3:)

¹⁶ 'And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

What the three disciples have witnessed is earth shattering. This is the Messiah, the Son of God. He will save his people. The transfiguration points to Jesus' divinity. The disciples may not have understood his divinity but certainly Luke means his readers to do so.

Now if we compare this to the reading from Exodus as Moses comes down the mountain he addresses the people and he gives them the commandments of God. When Jesus comes down the mountain he too sees the crowds but is confronted a day later by evil and sickness in the form of the demon possessed youth,

⁴² 'While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³And all were astounded at the greatness of God.'

One again Jesus' actions in the power of God affirm who he is. This power is cosmic. This is the ruler of all that is and evil stands no chance when faced with the power of God. Later on Calvary Jesus confronts the shrieks of the demons of cruelty and evil and is victorious by love. His resurrection on the third day sets us free forever.

It is useful now to read Exodus 34. 29-35, we remember that Moses had already met with God on Mount Sinai and been given the commandments, when he returned to the people he found that they had created the golden calf and he was furious with them. Once again they had let him, God and themselves down. His job was to return and intercede for them, to beg forgiveness and mercy for them. This meeting is where God swears the covenant with Moses and renews the tablets of the commandments.

²⁹ 'Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.'

Moses' face reflects the glory of God, but Jesus is part of that glory because he is divine. The transfiguration prefigures Jesus' resurrection. It foreshadows his future glory and is a hugely significant event. Moses gives the commandments to the people but veils his face because the people are not ready to see God's glory.

³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The point Paul is making in our reading from Corinthians is not that there is anything wrong with the law; the point is that Jesus fulfils the law. The vast majority of the Jewish people can't or won't see it. They see as through a veil, just like Paul himself in the beginning, they cannot see the glory of God that stands before them in Jesus. The old covenant given on Sinai has been superseded by the new covenant in Jesus Christ. This is what they need to see but they like their ancestors are stiff necked and rebellious following their own wishes. But for all who do follow Jesus,

¹² 'Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, ¹³not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. ¹⁵Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds;'

What people must see is that Jesus is the fulfilment of the law, he is the one of whom the prophets spoke. Now we can see why Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus on the mount of the transfiguration in affirmation of who he is.

It is only says Paul,

¹⁶ 'when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.'

It is only then that all becomes clear. This is the gospel Paul proclaims to them. The Corinthian Christians have turned to Jesus Christ, now then they must conform to his ways, and they must conform to Christian teaching. It is no good expecting to live in the old way. Those old standards have been turned upside down by Jesus, his teaching is countercultural. 'Love one another as I have loved you,' is not something any civilization had lived by till now. The old self must be jettisoned and the new self put on. How, because all those who truly turn to the Lord receive the Holy Spirit, the

Holy Spirit dwells within them. They need to see the Spirit within themselves, within others and at large in the world and respond accordingly. The glory of the Lord should be reflected in us as in a mirror. When people look at us they should know that we are followers of Jesus because of our behaviour.

¹⁷ 'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.'

This is the great good news that Paul is bringing. This is his ministry. You have been set free by Christ says Paul but with that comes the responsibility of living out his words and taking the good news to others.

So in chapter four Paul turns to himself and that ministry.

^{4.1} 'Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.'

In Corinth, as in all the Greek and Roman states, public speaking was a great tradition; they would have been used to clever orators who would persuade by silken words and cunning arguments. Not so Paul. He is a plain speaker, the gospel is proclaimed in plain words to God's glory, he has no need to embellish anything. He speaks out the wonderful truth of God's saving love for humanity. Paul is now one of the greatest of the evangelists on mission for God. He has no need to conform to the old accepted ways. No, he proclaims God's word boldly and plainly. It is up to the people to accept his ministry and if they do then they must do so wholeheartedly. Paul will never lose heart because he acts in God's strength, in the strength of the redeemer, the saviour and those gifts of God are freely given to all who truly turn to Christ.

For us, almost two millennia on, these truths are as fresh as ever. As Christians and followers of the way we all need to discern the will of Jesus in our everyday lives and try to follow him as our saviour and our guide

'May God be with you this day to surround you on all sides with his love.' Anon.

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