



# Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew  
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 11 February 2024

# Transfiguration Sunday before Lent

## The Curate will preach at St John's:-

On the cusp of Lent, we pause to gaze in wonder at who our Lord will be become – risen, ascended, glorified. But not yet. Thank goodness that we have already received the light that shines in the darkness. Hold tight to it, we will need it for the journey ahead; for there are no shortcuts, except through God's mercy.

*As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (Mark 9.9)*

### **An illustration to set the scene**

Have you ever got nearly to the end of a good book and decided to put it down 'til the next day because you don't want it to end? Or have you had that delicious pleasure, perhaps as a child, of peeking at the last page before you had read the whole book? With any good story we experience these two contradictory desires – to know the end as soon as possible and to prolong the pleasure of reading, of staying in the world that the author has created.

These days the risks of accidentally hearing the end of a play, film or book before you have reached the end are high. Turn over the page, flip through your phone or switch on the radio mid-item and

there's always the risk of a 'spoiler', the revelation of what comes next. And in our society of instant gratification, the pleasure of waiting for the ending can be entirely eliminated. With streaming, you are pushed into the next episode as soon as one is finished, and you can even 'binge watch' an entire series at one sitting. Gone are the days of eagerly waiting for the relevant night to watch the next episode. Or go back even further and picture the crowds eagerly waiting to snap up the next edition of the serialisation of, say, Charles Dickens', *Great Expectations*.

But life, as my father was always warning me, isn't like a book – or a film or a play or that matter. There are many things we cannot anticipate before they happen. We do not know what grief is like until we are thrust on that journey. And however much others tell us that it will become different, perhaps softer, in time, we cannot know that until we arrive there for ourselves.

### **Today's Gospel teaching**

It's a puzzle why the Gospels recount the Transfiguration at this point before Jesus has been glorified after death. The inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John are given an insider view on the question that Mark's Gospel continually asks us to make up our minds about, who is this Jesus? On the mountain they have a glimpse of God's glory, shining in the Son of Man and it is more than they at this stage can comprehend. Maybe a preview is a better analogy for their experience than a spoiler.

The Gospel is veiled, says St Paul and Mark's account illustrates the complexity of this in a way that resonates with human experience. There are signs, but there is also mystery that prevents the disciples grasping the meaning of those signs. They are on the mountain top, recalling the place where God revealed Godself to Moses (Exodus 24.12-18). Jesus's appearance is transformed in front of their eyes and his clothes become whiter than any human effort could make them (cf Daniel 7.9). He dazzles, shining of course with the glory of God. And, faced with the vision of such glory, the disciples experience pure terror.

The vision has a dream-like quality, the prophets Moses and Elijah appear speaking with Jesus, but what they say is not heard. And

then a voice from the enveloping cloud declares 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'. As God's glory shines in Jesus, the voice repeats the revelation at Jesus' baptism of his identity as Son of God (Mark 1.11).

But it is too early in the unfolding of events for the disciples to make sense of it all. Peter had already confessed Jesus as Messiah (Mark 8.29), but it won't be until the moment of crucifixion that the centurion will declare 'Truly this man was the God's Son.' (Mark 15.39). Peter mistakenly, but understandably, thinks this is the moment to celebrate God's glory and to hold onto it; he suggests building booths as for the Jewish harvest festival of Booths or Succoth. Did he think the time had now come to celebrate the final harvest? But he runs ahead of himself. The fulfilment is not yet.

### **How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?**

Like the disciples, the story of the Transfiguration can perplex us. All the learned commentaries in the world don't really help us get what is going on. Perhaps that's the point. It is our chance to share the confusion of the disciples, to recognize where we are in the journey. Ironically, at the moment when we hear about this revelatory moment we have just left behind Epiphany and we are gearing up for Lent, for the period of preparation and waiting for Christ's Passion. The Resurrection seems far off.

The story of the Transfiguration reminds us that we haven't got God all figured out. The divine glory is truly awesome and, even at our mountain top moments, when we glimpse the wonder and beauty of the Creator, we can't be sure of what we sense, and we certainly cannot fully express it. And we never will, until the end of the story. Only after Christ has come again in glory to be our judge will the world be transformed. Only after death will we see God. In those well-known verses from 1 Corinthians 13,

*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face-to-face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

It isn't about the kind of knowledge that gives you the answers, that let's you access the final episode straight away. It's about experience. It's about waiting,- waiting in trust, waiting in love.

Because we have glimpsed God's glory in Christ. As we heard in our reading:

*For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4.6)*

May that epiphany light accompany us through the journey of Lent, prepared to share the weight of sin and suffering, so that we can once again be surprised by the fire of Easter glory.

And yet, in the mystery that is God's grace, that is not the end of the story. Because God's time is not linear and we can even now experience that forgiveness and blessing, as it is not merely anticipated but made real in the Eucharist we can already share.

*As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (Mark 9).*

## **The Rector will preach at St Margaret's:-**

The God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness" has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. Rejoicing in that light, let us worship together.

*"... they were terrified". Mark 9:6*

### **An illustration to set the scene**

The history of science is full of inventions and discoveries, and many of them have a good story attached.

Think of the ancient Greek Archimedes, leaping out of his bath and running down the street shouting "**Eureka!**" after discovering the law of buoyancy.

Or Isaac Newton, sitting under the Lincolnshire apple tree formulating the laws of gravity.

Or Alexander Fleming, finding penicillin in a dish of bacteria accidentally contaminated while he was on holiday.

These stories give the impression that scientific discoveries come from **"light-bulb"** moments, which to some extent they do.

However, Archimedes was one of the leading scientists and mathematicians of his day before he jumped out of the bath.

Newton had studied at Cambridge and already made contributions to the understanding of physics, while Fleming had been researching bacteria for many years.

The greatest discoveries usually involve experience, hard work and inspiration, and often a bit of luck.

### **Today's Gospel teaching**

If they had had such things in first-century Palestine, the disciples might have described the experience on the mountain as their light-bulb moment.

But, like other such moments, it is not entirely a surprise.

Not to the disciples, or indeed to us, Mark's readers.

A lot of preparatory work has already happened.

Peter, James and John have been the central core of Jesus' group of disciples for some time.

In order to follow him, they have left behind their source of income, their families and their place in the community.

They have watched as Jesus has healed people and even brought them back from death.

They have seen him associate with lowly and despised people.

He has rescued them from a storm, and they have helped him feed five thousand people with a bit of bread and fish.

There can surely be no doubt in their minds that here is someone the like of whom has not been seen before.

Here is someone worth giving up everything for.

Here is someone who can control nature, who can dispel evil, who can change lives.

So the vision on the mountain should not come as a surprise.

And yet the three disciples are terrified, we are told.

Peter's response is to burble about building huts.

**"He did not know what to say,"** St Mark tells us. James and John wisely say nothing.

In one sense nothing has changed.

Jesus is still who he was.

The disciples have learned nothing new.

They have seen already that he is not an ordinary man, not even the best ever rabbi.

They have seen in him a power that can only be divine.

They have felt his uniqueness to the extent of committing their lives to it. All this they already know.

But in another way everything has changed.

The disciples have been taken to a place and time where the curtain between earth and heaven has been lifted.

They have seen and heard for themselves, undeniably, the secret of who Jesus is.

After the years of travelling, listening, thinking, working with Jesus, now they really know.

And they need to, because they are on their way to Jerusalem.

They will need there to muster every scrap of today's certainty, and even then it will fail them.

### **How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?**

How do we know who Jesus is, we who have not been up the mountain, we who have not seen Moses and Elijah?

Some of us will have had our own light-bulb moment, our experience of the mountain top, when we have become certain about Jesus and our lives have changed.

But many of us will be more like the rest of the disciples, left at the bottom of the mountain, relying on the

daily journey and the effort of understanding to help us go on believing when things get tough.

To go on believing that for us too, eventually, there will come a moment when earth and heaven meet, and we will see Jesus as he truly is.

*"... they were terrified". Mark 9:6*

[www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk](http://www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk)