

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Sunday next before Lent – 14th February 2021

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High mountains exert a special fascination on many people, and I am one of them.

Some of us approach a mountain with a combination of exultation, fear and joy. Some keep a respectful distance, and, with a sense of awe, try to capture the mountain's drama, as Paul Cézanne did in over 80 oil paintings and watercolours of the Montagne Sainte Victoire.

Others undertake the ascent, wishing to see 'what so great an elevation has to offer', in the words of the 'father' of alpinism, the Italian poet and scholar Petrarch, who climbed Mount Ventoux, the Beast of Provence, in 1336.

My own achievements are rather modest. I lack artistic skills, so I make do with taking hundreds of photos of my favourite peaks. I sometimes lack surefootedness, so I settle for hikes on moderately steep trails, with a preference for uphill paths.

I can well imagine Petrarch's feelings as he sat atop Mont Ventoux with the whole world unfurled below. One could see the hills of the province of Lyon to the right, and, to the left, the sea near Marseille (there was not much pollution in those days). Rather than go to the valley immediately, he opened the copy of St Augustine's Confessions he had brought with him and read: "Men go to admire the high mountains [...] yet pass over the mystery of themselves." Petrarch was about to discover for himself that the mountain can be not only the site of outward ascent, but also of deep transformation.

I can well imagine the feelings of Peter, James and John, once they had reached the top of the high mountain where they had been led by Jesus. For the three fishermen, it must have been quite a strenuous exercise, but, on the mountain, they were liberated from the burden of daily life, and could, with delight, embrace the expanse of the creation and its beauty.

The best was yet to come : dazzling clothes, Elijah and Moses - no less - in conversation with Jesus, a voice coming from a cloud, and a Transfiguration!

A Transfiguration? What does it mean? The event does not seem to belong to the central core of the Gospel. The apostles' proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ does not refer to it. Nor do we, when we declare our faith. And today, on Racial Justice Sunday, some will say that Mark, like so many other Biblical authors, with this story celebrates whiteness by connecting it with holiness - although whiteness, for many, is a construct of privilege and oppression.

The Transfiguration often seemed too mysterious to Western rational minds. There was only a very slow recognition that the Transfiguration provides "a gateway to the saving events of the gospel and allows us to see the mystery of Christ in its unity", in the words of Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey.

On the other hand, the commemoration of the Transfiguration has long been an essential part of the Eastern tradition, where in the liturgical calendar it is seen to be equal to Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension and Pentecost. Allow me, therefore, to do justice to the Transfiguration with the words of some Eastern thinkers.

We have not heard, so far, what the context of the ascent on the mountain is. Jesus is on his final journey up to Jerusalem. Immediately before this passage something akin to a 'Christological discussion' takes place: in turn, the crowds, the disciples and Jesus himself answer his question 'Who do you say that I am?' John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets ... offer the crowd. 'You are the Messiah', says Peter. His confession prompts Jesus to talk about the suffering, the rejection and the death of the Son of Man. Peter is outraged, but Christ rebukes him and stresses that not only he, but all those who wish to be his disciples are called to take up their cross and follow him. Follow him in his suffering? It is, I imagine, with a heavy heart that Peter, James and John start climbing the mountain. But once they have reached the mountain top, the fallen world has been left behind. Here it is easier to engage in prayer and to unite the restless mind with God. Here they can open themselves to receive "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ", as it says in our Epistle. God reveals something of His Son's divinity to them, "as much and insofar as they were able to apprehend it" (John Chrysostomos).

The suffering has been left behind, the divine glory illumines them. "It is good for us to be here. Let us dwell on the mountain top." How difficult it is for us to

reconcile the mystery of evil with our faith in the God of love to whom Jesus leads us. Don't we all want to escape suffering?

Approaching the paradox of suffering and evil, the 19th century Russian writer Dostoevsky claimed that beauty will save the world. Is this sheer escapism? Or perhaps an intuition?

Let me offer you another hint, from one of the hymns at Vespers for the Orthodox feast of Transfiguration:

*Transfigured today upon the mountain before the disciples,
In His own person He showed them human nature
Arrayed in the original beauty of the image.*

We have here the very definition of the Transfiguration in the Eastern tradition: it is the supreme occasion on which the divine Beauty has been revealed to humankind. The divine light that radiated from Jesus revealed him to the disciples as fully human, and, at the same time, as "Light from Light, true God from true God, [...] of one being with the Father", in the words of the Creed. Peter did not need to build a dwelling: the one and only tabernacle containing the glory of God was in front of him.

If you think that all this is too mystical to make sense for 21st century pragmatic people, let me tell you that I am thrilled by the language employed by the 14th century archbishop of Thessalonica, Gregory Palamas: he maintained that the light of the Transfiguration was uncreated and divine, identical to the uncreated energies of God. We know today that light is energy. We also know that what we call material "white" light contains all colours. Going back to Palamas, we can say that the uncreated light holds together, as well as bears, all diversity. Natural light, with its manifold colours, is essential for our wellbeing. Likewise, human diversity and all diversity originating in God's love and grace is not only good, but also essential for the wellbeing of our world.

The Transfiguration is not simply the revelation of what Jesus Christ is, but also of what we are. It reveals the glory of being human and the goodness of human diversity. In Christ transfigured on the mountain, we see our human nature united with God, filled with divine energies, yet still remaining totally human.

The beauty that saves the world is this uncreated beauty that shines forth on the mountain; but this uncreated beauty is equally manifested in the sacrifice of the Cross. “The paradox of suffering and evil” says the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, “is resolved in the experience of compassion and love”. First and foremost, this is true of the incarnate God. He is unconditionally committed to be with us in the midst of the anguish and despair of the world. The Transfiguration leads to the Cross, and the Cross leads to the Resurrection: this is where our hope lies.

Let us, therefore, go up the high mountain to understand the mystery of ourselves in the light of God. We will have to go down to the valley as transfigured disciples. We will have to reform ourselves into a transfigured community that radiates the grace we have received, that shares in the suffering, loneliness and discouragement of those around us, that fights poverty, discrimination, injustice.

The world can be transfigured, but this cannot happen without us carrying the cross. Let us ask God to help bear this cross, and to give us strength to hear his voice, in the hope that, in the world to come, we will see him as he is, eternal beauty that transfigures the world.

Amen.