

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection –Sunday next before Lent – 19th February 2023

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Today's readings focus on the transfiguration of Jesus, a strange event which is described both in the gospel reading and backed up by Peter in his letter. How do you describe something so unusual to someone who has never seen such a thing before? Matthew describes it in terms of blinding light – the face of Jesus shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. Intense brightness, the terms used being the brightest most shining examples the Gospel writer could think of. All through the Bible God appears in the form of light. From Moses having to wear a veil when he comes down the mountain from speaking to God, because his face was so radiant, through to Jesus describing himself as the light of the world.

Transfiguration isn't a word we hear used very often. The dictionary definition is "a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state:" But how does it happen? The transformation of a caterpillar, through its chrysalis state and then into a beautiful butterfly, bearing no resemblance to its former self, was one example I came up with. Dragonflies too, emerge from a rapacious beetle-like carnivore which lives in the water to an ephemeral, flying insect. Life itself is transforming – if you've ever held an egg in your hand when it suddenly cracks and out of the oval, hard shell, emerges a soggy little dinosaur, cheeping away is amazing and hard to explain if you don't see it for yourself.

Christ's transformation on the mountain is however vastly different to nature's daily miracles. There's all sorts of things happening here. The event itself comes six days after Jesus explains to his disciples that he is going to be killed, and rise again on the third day. Not unnaturally, they were horrified and scared by this, not wanting to accept it. We have the famous scene where Peter protests and is sharply admonished by Jesus, going as far as to say "Get behind me, Satan!" Poor old Peter,

in trouble again, because he doesn't want to lose Jesus, doesn't want him to suffer, not grasping that it's all part of the wider plan.

Now however, Peter, along with James and John, is given a glimpse of how very extraordinary Jesus is. Jesus needs them to understand that he will rise again, that his will be a horrible death but it is necessary to achieve what he is tasked to do and he is in control. They need to understand that he is divine, and no amount of words will ever equal that blinding picture of Jesus, shining as brightly as the sun, in all his glory. Nor will they ever forget it or the words they hear directly from God, affirming Jesus as his Son.

If this weren't enough for these three disciples, they also see Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus, despite them knowing that Moses died and Elijah was taken up to heaven. But here they are, large as life and talking to their leader. Moses represents the law, having taken down the Ten Commandments and written the laws in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. He led the Israelites to freedom. Elijah represents all the prophets who paved the way for the final and greatest of all prophets, Jesus himself.

This glimpse of the glory and divine nature of Jesus is in sharp contrast to what is shortly to unfold when Jesus is in Jerusalem, betrayed to the authorities, humiliated, beaten and killed, and true to his word and all the prophecies, rises again. Here, he's on a mountain, in glory, with shining white clothes, flanked by Moses and Elijah, with a bright cloud overhead, Peter is totally on side, knocked all of a heap by the wonder of what he is experiencing, and God himself declares that this is his wonderful son. Not so long after, Jesus is again on a hillside, his clothes have been taken from him and gambled for by soldiers, he's flanked by two criminals, the light is blotted out in darkness, Peter has denied he even knows him, and it's a pagan Roman soldier who exclaims that Jesus really was God's son.

What happened to the glory? Perhaps as Tom Wright says, "we only really understand... where we see it (the two events) side by side.... Learn to see the glory in the cross, learn to see the cross in the glory, and you will have begun to bring together the laughter and the tears of the God who hides in the cloud, the God who is known to be in the strange person of Jesus himself."

This is such a strange story, the transfiguration, that Peter felt it necessary to stress that it really did happen. He obviously feels strongly about it – were people denying

what he was teaching, making fun of him? He says “we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendour with our own eyes..... We ourselves heard that voice from heaven.” It was a crucial piece of evidence for the early church that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. It remains crucial to us today. As the bedrock of our faith.

We may not be as lucky as those three disciples, in witnessing Christ’s transfiguration, but we can be alive to his continued acts of transfiguration in the world today. It’s hard to keep sight of these when we are faced with what seems to be an endless series of dreadful events – climate change, the earthquake in Syria and Turkey, the pandemic, the economic crisis, the devastation wrought by nature on New Zealand, drought and war in Europe. It’s easy to be dispirited. But all around us, God is using us to transfigure our world and each other’s lives. Sponsoring a child transforms their life. There are urban gardeners turning wasteland into food producing areas of beauty, dedicated teachers moving children out of poverty and poor prospects into lives full of meaning, soup kitchens and food banks keeping families fed, families and friends cleaning up litter, people recycling, taking time to contact lonely people, people rushing to rescue others caught up in disasters - we can all do so much to transform the lives of others and our surroundings. Along the way we may well find ourselves transfigured too – doing God’s work, really listening to and taking to heart all that Jesus said, has that effect on people.

This account of the transfiguration of Christ, the glimpse given to three ordinary men of the real nature of Christ, is what the Christian faith is all about. Martin Luther, in his last sermon, wrote that whenever he had doubts or worries, he always reread this passage and in particular the line “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.”

Yes, there are lots of unanswered questions, from where did this take place to why was it only Peter, James and John who were invited to see it. But those questions aren’t really important today – like Martin Luther, we need to focus on the direct word of God confirming who Jesus was and telling us all to listen to him.

Who are we to ignore the word of God?

Amen.