

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

Sunday next before Lent - 19th February 2023

All Saints' Marseille

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The story of the Transfiguration (always read on the Sunday before Lent begins) is full of echoes, looking backwards and forwards. High on a mountain, you can see where you have come from and where you are going.

Looking back, in our Old Testament reading we saw Moses on the mountain with God, with his assistant Joshua ('Jesus' in Greek). Now we see Jesus on the mountain with Moses. Moses had received the Law on Mount Sinai; Jesus is fulfilling the Law with the new covenant.

Looking forward, Jesus is on the mountain with Peter, James and John. The next time this group will be together will be in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (traditionally identified as where the Transfiguration took place), there are two sanctuaries. One is called the Chapel of the Glorification, which you enter by flights of steps up the side of an archway where there are paintings of the Transfiguration, including the one at the top of your service sheets. Below is a flight of steps leading down into the Chapel of the Humiliation, where the paintings are of Gethsemane.

To put today's event in context, the disciples have just been with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost point of the kingdom, furthest from Jerusalem, when he asked them who people were saying he was. They replied that some were saying John the Baptist, others Elijah, others one of the prophets. 'What about you?', he asked. That was the moment when Peter uttered the words: we think you are 'the Messiah'.

At that point the story turns. Jesus's ministry in Galilee ends and they begin walking the road to Jerusalem. He warns them what is going to happen. The level of antagonism he is provoking from the religious and political authorities is such that he will not come out of his encounter with them alive. His followers must be prepared to share in his suffering, but in the end there will be a raising and there will be glory.

Initially they are reluctant to hear it, but six days later (the length of time Moses had waited to hear the voice of God from the cloud), Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on the mountain to pray. Suddenly they are confronted with the realisation that the experiences they are living through are what the whole history of Israel has been leading up to. Before they travel to Jerusalem, as we will do in heart and mind during Holy Week, they are offered a powerful glimpse of the glory that will ultimately be revealed in the Resurrection.

Transfiguration is a revelation of glory. There is a lot of symbolism in the story at this point. Mountains were where people had always gone to encounter God: Moses, who gave them the law, and Elijah, leader among the prophets. A cloud descending was the traditional symbol of God drawing near to whoever was being spoken to. Now, they hear words similar to those Jesus himself heard at his Baptism - as Peter writes in our epistle: 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'. So the Transfiguration is a key moment in the Gospel,

a point of revelation, where time and eternity meet, Jesus the link between heaven and earth.

But then it's over, as suddenly as it began. That's often the way with revelation. Jesus is 'found alone', and the little group of followers go back down the mountain and say nothing to anyone. What happens next is characteristic of the gospels and, I suspect, of our lives too. They are immediately plunged into a crisis, the distressing and difficult case of a child who is ill and not responding to the other disciples' ministering. They are back in the real world of suffering, fear, anger, distrust, and they set off on the way to Jerusalem where all those emotions will be heightened as Jesus faces trial, torture, crucifixion and death.

What they have not yet realised is that Jesus has given them a clue to a deeper meaning of transfiguration. They won't understand it fully until after the Resurrection. Transfiguration is not just about a revelation of beauty and significance. Whenever anyone expresses the truth to Jesus about his identity, he immediately stresses that it is bound up with suffering, rejection and death. The road to Jerusalem leads to the Cross, but what Jesus does when he reaches the Cross is to transfigure it. He turns an instrument of torture into a place of healing and redemption.

Let me try to explain. I think there are two types, two meanings, of transfiguration. First, there are the mountain top experiences – the breaking in of the infinite into the everyday - usually something we remember with enjoyment and gratitude. Then there is the other type of transfiguration - our experiences when we get to the foot of the mountain again and are almost overwhelmed by suffering, need and (finally) death. It is then that, by the grace of God, we experience what God in Christ does with that sort of suffering. He transfigures it. Sometimes it is the toughest times of our lives which, with

hindsight, we find are touched with grace and gift. Like the people of Israel, who felt closer to God in exile in Babylon than they had in the promised land. That paradox is one of life's deepest mysteries.

I believe our encounter with this second meaning of transfiguration is one of the most important things about having a religious faith. However much our faith is mixed with doubt and questioning, it can make a difference to how we can respond to the things that happen to us, both good and bad. It does not protect us from hurt or tragedy, but somehow it gives us a resource, if only a language, with which to grapple with it, a familiarity with things like paradox and transfiguration that can serve us well under pressure.

I was wondering how to express this when a young friend of mine, not particularly religious in a conventional sense, sent me an email of a quotation by Pope Francis about happiness. Unsurprisingly, Pope Francis expresses much more clearly the idea I have been trying to express. He writes:

"Being happy is not having a sky without storms, ... or work without fatigue, or relationships without disappointments.

Being happy is finding strength in forgiveness, hope in one's battles, security [in times of] fear, love in disagreements.

Being happy is ... not just commemorating success, but learning lessons in failures...

Being happy is to recognize that life is worth living, despite all the challenges, misunderstandings, and times of crisis. ...

Being happy is to stop being a victim of problems and become an actor in one's own history.

It is not only to cross deserts out of ourselves, but still more, to be able to find an oasis in the recesses of our soul.

It is to thank God every morning for the miracle of life.'

When I texted my friend to say she had helped with the writing of this sermon, she replied: 'Cool. Have a great day.' I liked that. I suspect Pope Francis might have liked it too.

Amen.