

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Sunday next before Lent**

**Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède**

**Eglise Protestante Unie, Manosque**

**11<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

*Christine Portman, Reader*

After two cold days of heavy rain and dark skies, how refreshing to hear readings filled with fire and light! This morning's readings recount two strange events, separated by nearly a millennium: in the first, from the OT, Elijah separated from Elisha by chariots and horses of fire whisked up into heaven by a whirlwind, and from the New, the Transfiguration of Jesus. What did you make of them? Some find both hard to credit, but have you ever seen the physical transformation of people when they fall in love? It's surely not so difficult to imagine the changes in Jesus as witnessed by the disciples. I had an older cousin, a very 'Plain Jane'. None of us thought she'd ever have a boyfriend, let alone marry. But suddenly there was a new man in her life. Her skin positively glowed as she talked about him. We could scarcely believe the transformation. Mood can change our appearance – apparently a rise in dopamine levels is the cause. But what we see in the accounts of the Transfiguration is extraordinary. In a lovely, homely detail, Mark says his clothes became *dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*. To understand the significance of this event it's worth looking at the similarities of the three synoptic gospels. Moses and Elijah and three key disciples, Peter, James and John are always present.

Firstly, what should we make of the presence of Moses and Elijah? They're figures of huge importance in Jewish tradition: the first represents the Law, and the second, the Prophets. Both climbed mountains, seeking God's presence. We're told Moses' face was so transformed by the experience that he had to veil his glowing face. In the gospel accounts, after Jesus becomes transfigured, the prophets appear and talk with him. Peter, impulsive as always, blurts out *let us*

*make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Like the others he's terrified and in his confusion he's no idea how to respond. Then, out of the cloud, comes God's voice: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'. Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

God's people had always been told to *listen to Moses and Elijah*. And they do remain important figures: when Jesus gives his New Commandment, he specifically says *on this hangs all the Law and the prophets*. But the Transfiguration marks an important change - now we must listen to Jesus. As Paul writes in this morning's epistle, the disciples have witnessed *the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*. Peter, James and John have known him until now as Jesus of Nazareth, now they see him in his true glory. He is the Christ.

So the presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain points to Jesus' true essence, and *where* the Transfiguration occurs in the gospels is also key. In all three, it happens just after Jesus reveals his coming fate: *the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again* (Mark 8.31). And in all the accounts it's preceded by Jesus' prophetic words: *Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power* (Mark 9.1). Peter, James and John who see his full, divine power, are the same three who would be with him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The second letter of Peter vividly recalls that day on the mountain. It's worth repeating, because it was clearly life-changing for the disciples who had witnessed the transfiguration:

*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.*

*So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no*

*prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

Bill Bright comments: *The Transfiguration pulled a veil aside for Peter, James, and John. They got to see and understand the world in a way the other disciples didn't yet. They witnessed that life was made up of more than what their eyes could see and their ears could hear. They were to share in Christ's glory and to share that glory with others, and that's the essential point we need to take away from the Transfiguration. On these dark winter days, surrounded by gloomy news from across the globe, perhaps not many of us arrived feeling particularly glorious or surrounded by light. And I suppose none of us considers ourselves to be particularly holy. Do we imagine ourselves numbered among the saints? But, flawed as we are, and flawed as those disciples were, this is what Jesus calls us to be. *Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these* (John 14.12) He knows that we have the capacity to empty ourselves of our human selfishness, to open ourselves to the immense riches of the grace he would love to pour into us. He has faith in us.*

When we recognise where we've fallen short of the best God wills for us, it seems incredibly presumptuous to think that we too could possibly share in Christ's glory - but that's precisely what he calls us to do. Like Peter and the other disciples, we've been called to share in Christ's glory, and to share that glory with others.

Pope Francis comments: *"From the event of the Transfiguration I would like to take two significant elements that can be summed up in two words: ascent and descent. We all need to go apart, to ascend the mountain in a space of silence, to find ourselves and better perceive the voice of the Lord. This we do in prayer. But we cannot stay there! Encounter with God in prayer inspires us anew to 'descend the mountain' and return to the plain where we meet many weighed down by fatigue, sickness, injustice, ignorance, poverty both material and spiritual. To these in difficulty, we are called to bear the fruit of that experience with God, by sharing the grace we have received".*

We're called to be lights in a needy world: in the first hymn we sang *Fill me, Radiance divine*. In the last, we'll sing of going out *in the strength of God* so that *the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world*. This week we begin our journey through Lent. Like Peter, James and John we'll move

from Christ's glory to his suffering – but then on to the triumph of Easter Day. So as we pray and reflect on all that this means, let's do so in hope, knowing that God trusts us to work his purpose out. As he relied on the prophets and on Jesus, he now relies on us.

*Nearer and nearer draws the time,  
the time that shall surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.*

Amen.