

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon –Sunday next before Lent

Transfiguration Sunday – Racial Justice Sunday

All Saints' Marseille

11th February 2024

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Chariots of fire, a mantle that can part the water, dazzling garments, Elijah and Moses brought back from the past to converse with Jesus. Witness Elijah ascending in a whirlwind into heaven, and Jesus being transfigured on the mountaintop. For those drawn to spectacular narratives and dramatic displays, this is the Sunday in the church's year not to be missed. One might even envy Peter, James and John for their front-row seats to an immersive sound and light show.

Yet, in our modern, disenchanted world, many of us grapple with how to interpret the significance of the Transfiguration story. Are we reading a historical account embellished over time, a truth conveyed through mythological allegory, or a theological metaphor with deeper implications?

On this Racial Justice Sunday, another perspective emerges: the Scripture passages we've just read could hint at the notion that being dazzling white is the ideal way to be, but also that darkness needs light to be deemed acceptable. In the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2024, *Tarry Awhile: Wisdom from Black Spirituality for People of Faith*, author Selina Stone warns against trying to force everything, even theological arguments, into a 'light versus dark' dichotomy. Such binary frameworks, though helpful for illustrating some spiritual or theological concepts, can be problematic. Stone says, "Race, which categorises humanity in a hierarchy of 'light' at the top and 'dark' at the bottom, could be seen as a prime example of the problems of this binary thinking." She continues, "We have to be mindful of how use of language can affect how we view or treat one another."

Mark's Gospel certainly offers here the echo of an event that has made a great impression on the disciples. Decades after the Transfiguration, the second Letter of Peter appealed to the disciples' experience on the mountain to rebut criticism that the first communities of believers followed "cleverly devised myths." No, the author says, "we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1.16-18). Over the centuries, the Transfiguration has steadily accumulated meanings – most of them deeply theological: it visibly manifested the union of human and divine in Jesus Christ, affirmed his place in the stream of Israel's history of salvation, confirmed his Messiahship which Peter had confessed before their ascension on the mountain, and prefigured Christ's coming in glory at the end of times. Few events reported in the New Testament are so rich.

While the Transfiguration may have initially appeared daunting for the Western mindset, which often gravitates towards analysis, categorisation and rational explanation, it has long captivated the Eastern churches. Since the 4th or the 5th century, its commemoration has stood as one of the great feasts in the liturgical calendar, holding equal stature with Epiphany, Ascension and Pentecost. Western churches are now endeavouring to rekindle a deeper understanding of this event, perhaps seeking a more mystical dimension beyond the confines of their traditional interpretations. The dazzling brilliance and the celestial voice coming from the cloud challenge complacent and perfunctory faith, inviting believers to a renewed encounter with the divine. A 'mystery of light par excellence', that's how John Paul II described the Transfiguration.

Mark's narration of the Transfiguration is succinct: "He was transfigured before them." The vision cannot be fully captured in words. The events on the mountain are shrouded in mystery – inviting contemplation and meditation, promising transformative power when internalised by the disciple. This echoes the ethos of the Eastern tradition of icons. They are, in many ways, aids to instruction and to spiritual introspection. Icons function akin to sermons, conveying something about the mystery of Christ, which is offered for contemplation and prayer. In earlier times, every painter who took up icon 'writing' had to commence his craft with the depiction of the Transfiguration. This act symbolized not merely painting with colours, but rather capturing the uncreated light of the Transfiguration, training the artist's eyes to perceive its radiance, which would permeate every subsequent work.

In Theophanes the Greek's icon, featured on the service sheet, the disciples prostrate themselves in fear and awe before the splendour and the holiness unfolding before them. Yet they are not mere witnesses, they are participants.

On the mountain, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is revealed – despite the confusion, imperfection and misunderstanding of the disciples. They are touched by rays emanating from Christ - light, energy, holiness, and glory - purifying and transforming them. As Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, through Christ they receive “the hope of sharing the glory of God” (Romans 5.2). Though this glory may not yet be tangible, the promise is palpable, demanding faith from each of Christ’s disciples: “Listen to him.”

The Gospel narrative of the Transfiguration, capturing the moment when the disciples beheld Jesus in his full glory – a vivid reality of how God’s love goes beyond our imagination - is an invitation to perceive beyond appearances and acknowledge the presence of Christ, who has come to illuminate our human journey. Each of us is called to seek out the transfigured Christ in the world, not merely to marvel and rejoice in that presence, but also to heed and respond with the heart of a disciple. It is in our everyday lives that God’s glory must radiate, so that others may be bathed in his light as we have been.

The essence of the Transfiguration proclaims that the glory of God defies containment. Peter's impulse to build tabernacles on the mountaintop is futile. God's glory demands to spill forth into the valleys of our world. While we may never experience anything as powerful as the Transfiguration, each day, in countless and perhaps small ways, God’s glory permeates our lives - sometimes in unexpected ways, often in ordinary glimpses of extraordinary love. It is transformative and calls us to serve all of God’s children, with justice, honesty, and humility. May we be open to this call, prepared to embody the boundless, transfiguring glory of God. May we be given the grace to shine in the world with this light that never fades, because God is its inexhaustible and eternal source.

Amen.