

11 February 2024: Sunday next before Lent

*The Transfiguration of Jesus Year B 11:02:24 Mark 9: 2-9*

One way to understand the Transfiguration of Jesus is to know something about the two men who appear beside him on the mountain, Elijah and Moses. Jesus, accompanied by Peter James and John, goes up a mountain to pray, something they often did together.

Mountains can either be wonderful or scary, they can inspire awesome moments or fearful ones. I remember when Roger and I reached the top of the Langdale Pikes in the Lake district on our third attempt, the first two having been aborted by extreme weather conditions, one of them particularly scary because of a snowstorm. The joy and elation we felt on reaching our goal was palpable, we really were on top of the world with all creation below us – the only two people in existence it seemed! So mountains can be wonderful when the sun shines and you reach the top to see the fantastic views, or scary when the wind howls and the rain pours and you can't see what's ahead of you. Today's journey to a mountain is beyond wonderful as the journey takes us to a place where God is present in his magnificence, we hear his voice and see a dazzling light and sense the awe of the occasion. In Jesus' time, people probably didn't care for mountains, thinking of them just as lumps of rock, somewhere to run and hide and be alone in that lonely place between the earth and the sky. A place where suddenly God could feel very close indeed. That's why, long before the Transfiguration, Elijah climbed a mountain hoping to find God, and he did so, but not in the way he expected. Elijah was a prophet, battling on God's behalf against Ahab, who was persecuting God's people. Elijah heard that Ahab wanted him dead so he fled to the top of Mount Sinai where he found a cave to hide in like a scared rabbit. But it was there that God spoke to him saying, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Elijah said, "Israelites have killed all your people, I'm the only one left and now they're after me." God told Elijah to stand before him at the top of the mountain. he sent violent winds that split the rocks – but God was not in the wind. Then he sent an earthquake that split the summit, but God was not in the earthquake. Finally, God sent a fire which roared about Elijah's feet, but he was not to be found in the fire. But after the fire there was a still, calming silence – nothing no sound at all, and it was then that Elijah heard the voice of God. He covered his face with his cloak and listened as God told him to go back down the mountain where he would find 7000 Israelites alive who still believed in God and who were waiting for Elijah to find them another king. Elijah the greatest of the Jewish prophets who it is said had not died but had been taken up into heaven in a flaming chariot had heard the voice of God.

Moses too was a very important figure in the history of the Jewish people. It was he who had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he who God gave the ten Commandments by which we are all to live while he looked at the burning bush without seeing the face of God.

But on the mountain top instance in today's story, his one command to the disciples is to 'Listen to him!' Listen to his words on that day but more than that, to listen to all that Jesus teaches them and has yet to teach them.

Peter, James and John would have known of the work of Elijah and Moses, both had been dead for centuries, so to see them in a blast of light standing next to Jesus would have been another confirmation to them that Jesus truly was the Son of God; and to top it all, out of a cloud came the voice of God saying exactly that, no wonder they were scared! The disciples eyes had been opened to see Jesus as he had always been – divine – the Son of God.

Then everything returned to normal and the disciples found themselves alone with Jesus once more, but they would never forget what had happened that day on the mountain, nor could they ever forget who Jesus was – as hard as that was to believe.

I often wonder why we have the story of the Transfiguration on the Sunday before Lent when it has its own feast day in August. Perhaps it's because today we see Jesus with Peter James and John going up a mountain when next Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, we will have another journey when Jesus will go into the wilderness. Both journeys take us to a deserted yet different place, one where God is present in his magnificence and we hear his voice and see a dazzling light, the other where Jesus is alone in the wilderness with seemingly no presence of God, just the opposite, there is a strong presence of Satan – the devil; this time God feels hard to find.

We all have moments like these, times when we keenly feel God's presence, and at other times, we experience periods of wilderness, we feel lost, alone and unloved. But it is in the wilderness times that we need to lean on God more than ever to see us through. It could be that this is what Jesus was doing when he went to the desert, knowing he was going to his death on the cross, he needed to pray to God for strength to help him fight anything that could distract him from what lay ahead.

On Wednesday we begin the season of Lent, so please join us for our service of Holy Communion with the imposition of ashes at 7pm at Great Houghton church, a time of preparation that begins our walk with Jesus to his suffering and death on the cross, a time of darkness for all Christians. Yet the season ends up on the spiritual mountain top of Christ's resurrection and the joy of Easter day.

We live with the knowledge that Jesus is risen and that the same divine Jesus who was revealed to the three disciples on the mountain top, walks with us and can transform us and our lives if we let him.

Listen to him! Amen