

ADDRESS**14 February 2021****Transfiguration**2 Kings 2:1-12

Elijah ascends to heaven

Psalms 50:1-6

God as judge

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

The knowledge of the glory of God

Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration

*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear
and to understand your Word, and
open our hearts to do your will.
We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

'Six days later'. That's how today's Gospel reading begins. Six days later than what?

Six days after Jesus tells the disciples that, *There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power*'. The transfiguration, the glimpse of Jesus as he truly is, the vision of the heavenly Jesus, is related to the time of his disciples' death. That's when we will see him as he truly is.

So why did Jesus give Peter, James and John a preview? Why did the other disciples miss out? Why do a few people continue to have mystical experiences of God, but others do not? The answer is hidden in the event itself. But this image may help us find it.



The image is from a mosaic inside the dome of the modern church on Mount Tabor in Israel, where the event is believed to have taken place. We know that the Feast of the Transfiguration was celebrated in Jerusalem as early as the 7th century. It is now celebrated in almost every part of the church, but on a variety of dates, even in the Anglican church.

At the top of the image is a glimpse of the heaven Jesus left behind to come to earth for our sake. The fingers of the glory of God, the power of God, reach down towards him as if reluctant to let him go.

Jesus' mud-soiled garments are transformed into a dazzling white, such as no-one on earth could bleach them. On his right stands Moses holding the book of the law, on his left is Elijah, holding his miracle-working mantle. The glory of the law and the power of the prophets have come together in Jesus, the seal of the prophets.

The Old Testament records that the prophets Elijah and Elisha were separated by a chariot of fire and horses of fire. In the Transfiguration Jesus came close to his closest disciples. In fulfilling Old Testament law and prophecy, he went beyond the precedent, as he did so often.

For Peter and James and John, the Transfiguration confirmed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the one who fulfilled all the Law and the prophets. They had shared his life on the road for almost

three years. If they had not been convinced by his teachings, and by his love for the poor and the sick, and by his miracles of healing, they would be by this glimpse of the heavenly glory he left behind and was soon to return to.

On Moses' side stands the awestruck Peter, who could not make sense of what he was seeing. He babbled. Perhaps he thought that if he built dwellings for the three heavenly beings, he could capture the experience for ever. The other two disciples are not recorded as saying anything, they stood dumb-founded.

Then God speaks, *This is my beloved Son, listen to him*. Listen to him when he speaks about death, *in my father's house are many dwelling places, I go to prepare a place for you*; listen to him when he speaks of his own death, *he will be rejected, he will be killed, he will rise again*. Death is never to be feared, it is to be embraced, because death returns us to the God who gave us life.

Image off

Three of the disciples shared the Transfiguration experience, the others missed out. Peter, James and John were told not to speak about it to them, or to anyone. Throughout Christian history, there have always been believers who have struggled to come close to the heavenly Jesus in person, in a variety of ways.

Some followed Solomon, or took the cue from Peter, and built dwellings for God. The first church on Mount Tabor had three chapels, one for each of the disciples. In Western Europe, churches and cathedrals were given towers which reached towards heaven – 80 metres, 100, 150 . . . the tallest is 161½ metres at Ulm cathedral in Germany, but that is soon to be eclipsed by the tallest pinnacle of Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, 11 metres taller.

Other aspirants tried to experience heaven through appealing to the senses -- through sacred art, or sacred music. They, too, were blinded by *'the god of this world'*, in the words of today's epistle – churches and sacred art and sacred music were often created to enhance the artists' reputations and their incomes, not for the glory of God

Everywhere the gospel took hold, many churches were richly adorned simply because many people love beautiful architecture; fine oratorios were written for the mass because many people love beautiful music, and great religious paintings and murals and frescoes were created to adorn the churches because many people love fine art.

When we go into St Paul's cathedral in London, do we cry out, *How great is God!* or do we murmur, *How great is Christopher Wren!* When we lament the fire damage to Notre Dame in Paris, are we mourning the loss of a house of God, or the often-abused centre of France's turbulent history? When we hear a fine oratorio in the theatre, or listen to our own choir singing an anthem, do we reflect on the message in the words, or do we simply consider how well it was sung?

It is easy to be distracted from the ultimate reality, as Peter was, and as we often are, by great architecture and great music and great art.

In the Middle Ages, cathedral building became a matter of civic pride. Many of the great cathedrals of England and France and Italy and Spain and other countries in Europe were built to display the glory of the city, rather than the glory of God. As late as the 1890s, the tower of Ulm cathedral was made 10 metres higher than originally planned, so it would be taller than the twin towers under construction at Cologne.

Today many of the great cathedrals of Europe are maintained simply as tourist attractions. They are owned by the state, and no services are held in many of them. They have lost their purpose.

Beauty for its own sake can become idolatry. On the other hand, the danger of making churches look like bare lecture theatres, as many of our churches do, in this diocese and elsewhere, is that we can learn about the God of all truth without **experiencing** the God of all beauty. And that's a barren encounter.

In the Transfiguration we catch a glimpse of Jesus as he truly is, radiating the glory of God. The Word made flesh. Truth and beauty are revealed as one. That's a truth which the poet John Keats captured in a famous line.

From the second century onwards, other believers have tried to come close to Jesus through Christian meditation, emptying themselves of every thought except the image of Jesus' glory, looking for a transfiguration of the mind. Still others have become mystics, living apart from the world, treading the lonely threefold path of purification, illumination and unification.

Many of us have known Jesus all our lives. He is with us on the plain, in our daily routine, as he was with all the disciples, in theirs. He is with us as we are busy earning our living, caring for our families, preparing meals, washing dishes, washing clothes, watching TV, guarding our health.

Only in worship can we rise above these mundane activities. This is why we need both truth and beauty in our architecture and our liturgy. And we also need to spend more of our time in church in silence, in prayer, ready to see Jesus or to hear the voice of God when he speaks to us.

The time before the service begins can be a time of silent anticipation of coming closer to God; here, at St Mark's, it is noisy, as people socialise or do last-minute church business. And our services can often be just talk-talk-talk, with no silences in which we might listen for the voice of God.

The three synoptic Gospels all tell the Transfiguration story, in almost the same words, but Luke's gospel adds a significant detail – Jesus took the disciples up the mountain to pray. This is how **we** can be ready for our experience of his heavenly glory – being prayerful is being prepared. And our prayers need to include adoration and confession and thanksgiving as well as supplication.

Often we come to God in prayer only when we want something. And we wonder why our prayers seem to make no difference.

Many of us see a glimmer of the glory of God in prayer, or in worship, or in reading the Scripture; we may have a mountain -top experience when Jesus becomes real to us in the reading of the Gospel. *I am the resurrection and the life. . . . Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. . . I go to prepare a place for you . . .* Words of power.

Some believers tell the story of their conversion experience, they tell it over and over again, as if to preserve it in their memory, or to inspire others. Others see the glory of God in the first rays of the sun on waves crashing on to a deserted beach, or in the dark stillness of the rainforest. But the Transfiguration story reminds us that these experiences are momentary, and they are not for everyone.



Suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. The link with the past had been acknowledged. Now it was broken. None of the old prophets had given their lives to save their people. It was time for the three disciples to go back down to the plain, to join the others in their everyday tasks of finding food and shelter, to face the reality of Jesus' coming death, and the certainty of their own.

Image off

But the experience had given them courage to deal with death; they had had a glimpse of eternal life, life filled with the glory of God. And history shows how their time with Jesus gave them the strength to defy both the Jews and the Romans to spread the good news of his resurrection life after his return to heaven.

This is something we can look forward to as well. We have Jesus' eternal promise: *Because I live, you shall live also.* (John 14.19)

O God, our strength and our redeemer, we thank you for this vision of your glory. We praise you that you do not leave us in this life, nor abandon us in death. Show us your beauty and your truth, and strengthen our hope that nothing in all creation can separate us from your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

For Connections

The Transfiguration of Jesus

(Mk 9.2-9)



With Jesus on the mountain-top.

To God be the glory!

With Jesus on the plain.

With Jesus in eternal life.