

Sunday next before Lent – 14 Feb 2021

A few years ago, Liz and I were holidaying in the Trossacks in Scotland and one afternoon I took a stiff walk, I couldn't claim it to be a climb, up a nearby hill – and at the top I could suddenly see things I couldn't see from anywhere else; in particular two lochs, one on either side of me. In a sudden I got a fresh perspective on what the map told me was there but which I couldn't see from the ground.

Up a mountain, we are away from everything and everyone else; you see things differently; and I don't just mean your physical environment but the whole of life. Up a mountain there is the opportunity for real silence. And in that silence people often discover a clarity of mind that otherwise eludes them; life makes sense, problems are diminished, resolutions are found. Life seems different, less complicated, more real.

God can seem closer too. In a sense God does seem closer up a hill; this helps explain the medieval notion of heaven in the sky and hell under the earth, and helps to explain all the steps you find outside and inside churches. Our search for God, our striving towards Him, takes real physical effort.

In scripture mountains are places where amazing and divine things happen – hence the story of Moses on Mt Sinai and the story of the transfiguration of Jesus amongst others.

Our gospel reading last Sunday – the beginning of John's gospel - felt very out of place, normally read of course at Christmas. Today's reading – the transfiguration – feels equally out of place; it is usually read, of course, on 6th August.

But there is a reason we're hearing this story today, just before the start of Jesus' ministry.

The transfiguration is a challenging story to get our heads around. Whatever actually happened it was clearly quite amazing. What is important for us, is less the detail of precisely what happened, and more the significance that we are being asked to draw from the events as they are described.

Several things are worth noting:

1. The disciples Jesus was with – Peter, James and John. These are the same three that were with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. So, the transfiguration is being presented as both a pivotal and private event.
2. Listen to the echo of Jesus' own baptism: do you remember these words: "this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased....listen to him". God wants the disciples to develop their understanding of who Jesus is.
3. The presence of Moses and Elijah ensures that the disciples understand the importance of Jesus; yet it is only when Jesus is left alone that the disciples begin to understand that in Jesus the OT law and prophecy are fulfilled – Jesus alone is sufficient.
4. Jesus' transfiguration – his radiance - is an illustration, a foretaste of Jesus' majesty and glory.

So how does this all fit together for us in the few days left before the start of Lent?

Two weeks ago we celebrated Candlemas: that great festival of Light at the end of Christmas. The transfiguration today continues the theme: we are the light

of the world – “a city set on a hill that cannot be hid” as Luke’s version has it.

Quoting some words from the BCP communion service: Jesus asks that you “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

So, as we begin to think about Lent, let the story of the transfiguration – Christ’s light shining out to his disciples - encourage us to reflect on *our* transformation as disciples of Christ.

How is our light shining out to those around us this Lent?

I haven’t yet decided on my Lenten discipline for this year. I’m still struggling to get my head around being on sabbatical!

But, let me be honest, lenten disciplines are not easy; we need God’s help with Lent as with all things. But, it is in giving of ourselves to others that we discover the freedom of which Paul speaks in our new testament reading: “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” So a lent in which we give ourselves freely to others might be a good discipline to explore.

On top of a mountain one can feel truly free. Free of all the burdens of the day, the relationships that struggle, the to do lists that are left undone, the disappointments of the past or the frustrations of the present.

Freedom and fulfilment in Christ feels like that – but is available to you and me every day without the need to find a mountain to climb.

The route to that sense of freedom I find is service; service to family, friends, community, church, the world – and all service is ultimately a giving of ourselves in thanksgiving to our Creator, God.

Life, most fully lived, is a journey through which we return to God by giving back to Him the love He has outpoured for us.

I'm going to close with a prayer that was pivotal in my own faith journey because in these few words I discovered how I could grow in my relationship with God through serving others. It will be very familiar to many and if it's new to you, let it seep into your soul.

Let us pray:

O God, the author of peace
And lover of concord,
To know you is eternal life,
To serve you is perfect freedom.
Defend us your servants
From all assaults of our enemies;
That we, surely trusting in your defence,
May not fear the power of any adversaries;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen.**