**Transfiguration – Luke 9:28-36 (Mark 9:2-8, Matt. 17:1-8) Sermon by Rosemary Sumner 27th March 2022**

“Screw your courage to the sticking-place, And we’ll not fail.” (I:7)

With these famous words, Lady Macbeth tried to encourage her husband to kill King Duncan. The problem was that Macbeth actually had a conscience and was reluctant to murder a good king. In the end, it was not Lady Macbeth’s nagging which persuaded him, but the strange vision which he had.

“Is this a dagger which I see before me,

The handle toward my hand. Come, let me clutch thee:

I have not, and yet I see thee still ….Art thou but

A dagger of the mind?”

Despite his doubts, he concludes:

“Thou marshall’st the way that I was going

And such an instrument I was to use.” (II:1)

He was convinced initially that this vision was sent to show him that he was meant to kill Duncan and it gave him the courage to do the dreadful deed.

What you might ask, is this to do with the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Hermon?

Well, the problem with many extracts from the Bible which we read in church is that we do not always know their context within the larger story. Mark, Luke and Matthew make it very clear that the Transfiguration is closely linked to the events 6 or 8 days earlier. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter had declared that he recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of God. Then Jesus amazed and horrified the disciples by warning them that this role would bring suffering, firstly to himself, and later to his followers. Not the traditional view of the promised Messiah!

This is the turning point of his ministry. As Luke indicates, Jesus now sets his face towards Jerusalem and the almost certain danger and death which awaits him there. This requires incredible courage and like, Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play, he needs to be convinced that this is the right decision. Is this God’s will, or is he making a terrible mistake?

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went to see John the Baptist and was convinced that he too should be baptised. This baptism became the moment of his commissioning and it was accompanied by the vision of the Holy Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove. Moreover, we are told that a voice from heaven acknowledged him with the words, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus then departed alone to the Judean desert to consider deeply what that role might entail.

Now he is faced with more decisions and we can see the Transfiguration as the event which helped to shape his resolve and give him courage. It is first and foremost a personal experience for Jesus; but the 3 closest disciples are privileged to share some aspects of it. We are familiar with the different elements: the cloud which descends representing the Shekinah or presence of God; the appearance of Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet; the voice from heaven reaffirming that Jesus is the Son, the Chosen or Beloved One; and the command that they should listen to him, indicating that he is the “Prophet like unto Moses” promised in Deut. 18:15.

Some have viewed this event as purely symbolical or mythical. But what is reality? For most of us, most of the time, reality tends to be what we ourselves can see, can touch, can measure, can experience physically. We are creatures of time and space, and our living is done within these boundaries. But is that really all that there is?

J K Rowling, in her *Harry Potter* novels described a world in which there are two parallel realities: there is the world we all inhabit, and a magical world which is present for some people, but invisible and inaccessible to most. At times, though, the two realities coincide, or overlap, and result in a breaking-in of the magical world to the physical one.

Harry Potter is, of course, fiction, but religious faith also deals in parallel realities: the world of the flesh (that is, everything that we can see, touch, and measure), and the world of the spirit (less quantifiable, more elusive, but no less real). And there are points when the two come powerfully together. The Transfiguration may be one such occasion.

Recently, we have learned more about psychical experiences when various kinds of visionary and auditory experiences have been investigated, such as the sensations of bright light. It has been suggested that the form of such experiences is likely to be influenced by the conscious and unconscious minds of the persons involved. The Theologian, W. K. Lowther Clarke suggested that, “Whatever took place was primarily in our Lord’s consciousness” and for a brief time, the disciples were able to enter into his consciousness and see with his eyes. This fits in with Luke’s assertion that it all took place while Jesus was praying.

There are some other details which are helpful to consider.

Peter, who does not understand what is going on, asks if they may erect tabernacles or tents for the three. He would probably like to hold on to this moment; but just as the tabernacle in the wilderness was a temporary dwelling place for God, so the Transfiguration is but one moment in time and Jesus must move on. The 3 disciples are “heavy with sleep” and can barely keep awake. The next time we hear them suffering in this way is in the Garden of Gethsemane when the same 3 disciples fall asleep while Jesus is desperately praying to God to ascertain if it really is God’s will that he should drink the cup of suffering and allow himself to be crucified – the most horrendous form of death employed by the Romans.

It is Luke who makes clear the important link between the Transfiguration and the Agony in Gethsemane when he tells us that the three figures spoke of the **departure** which Jesus was to accomplish in Jerusalem. The significance of Moses and Elijah in this instance is that neither had experienced death in the normal way. Moses went off into the desert to die alone and his body was never found. Elijah made a spectacular exit in a chariot of fire and a whirlwind and so also had no known place of burial. The word Luke uses for “departure” is “exodus” and this links with the Last Supper, for by his death Jesus was to bring into being the new Covenant between God and his people, just as Moses had established the first Covenant after leading the Israelites out in the Exodus from Egypt. From all these little details, it would appear that Moses and Elijah were talking of his death and helping Jesus to take courage and go forward with the confidence that he was acting in accordance with God’s will for him.

In the light of the terrible events happening in Ukraine at the present time and the horrific threats made by Vladimir Putin to the rest of NATO, we too need to “screw our courage to the sticking place”. As we go forward into Lent, may we remember the courage of Jesus and ask God to give us the courage which each of us needs to face the problems which beset us, do his will and live as Kingdom People. Amen