

Sunday before Lent, 20223

Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration: Jesus', but also yours

“While I was at university, I was in my lodgings. I was asleep and I had a visit, and the voice said I am the Alpha and Omega. I thought it was Adam. I was standing by this tree, and underneath this tree, I had an apple. A beautiful big red apple. This man approached me. And I said, excuse me, would you like to share my apple? And he looked, and he said that’s very kind of you. I said it’s all right. So

I cut the apple in half. And we’re talking, and this man is very genteel, has very striking eyes, is very soft, and has a very comforting manner. I turned around and didn’t eat my part of the apple. I said would you like another piece of apple? He said, you’re very kind, very caring. He went around the campfire and sat down, and he turned around to me, and he said, why do you try to use big words? I said I don’t mean to use big words. I don’t understand big words. People don’t listen to me. He said, what do you mean? I said I find it very hard to put my point across on paper, let alone in speaking to somebody. He said, you’ll be heard. He said try to be yourself and be honest with yourself and true. You won’t remember everything that I say to you. He got up, and he was walking away, and as he was waving, I said, oh my gosh. I know who you are. I said you’re Jesus. He waved and he went like that, as he was walking away. All I heard was you’ve got it right, or something like that. I’ve kept that memory with me all the time. I thought, I’ve just been visited by Jesus. I’ve been visited by his angels. I’ve been visited by God himself. Living with schizophrenia and knowing that God is by your side is a positive aspect. He may not answer you as an immediate solution, but the end results can be more rewarding than what you can ever anticipate.”¹

On that day at university Simone experienced a moment with Jesus, which took her to a moment with God and she’s never forgotten it. That experience, gave her a sense of what it felt like to be visited by Jesus and by God. It gave her the courage with all the challenges

that she faces – including living with schizophrenia - to be the person she is called to be. To take up her cross and continue to follow Jesus – wherever that may lead. You could call it her transfiguration moment.

The transfiguration of Jesus is one of the events in the life of Jesus that can be received as a rather passive experience –one step removed from the action one pictures the disciples, themselves also observers, standing there mouths dropped open watching Jesus’ moment with God.

But third party observation isn’t really true to what we know about life as a follower of Jesus, is it?

When Jesus invited people to come and see, he didn’t mean just stand there and watch. He meant come and see and get involved. Get caught up in the action of God with me. Come with me, Jesus says to P,J,J. He didn’t take Peter, James and John up the mountain so that they could sit there and watch. He took them up there so that they could experience transfiguration.

The orthodox tradition captures this brilliantly. The transfiguration is a big feast in the orthodox church and has been a popular subject for icon writing over the centuries. Let me remind you that icons are not a painting that you look at politely from a few feet away. Icons are prayers designed to draw you in to the mystery of God.

In a lovely book he wrote about icons, Rowan Williams points out that icons show the lines of perspective reversed, so that they converge on your eye, not on a vanishing point in the distance

¹ From the Sanctuary Mental Health Course

within the picture.² The icon invites us to look through into the deep wells of life and truth.

Icons of the transfiguration will depict Jesus with robes of pure white, standing on a rocky outcrop. He is placed against a background of darker colour – red or deep blue – in concentric circles or mandorla shapes. Moses and Elijah stand on either side and further down the mountain are the disciples in some sort of disarray, but around them and the prophets the bright light emanating from Jesus bounces off their cloaks as well.³ They are caught up in the light. Blinded by it. Overshadowed by the cloud.

The transfiguration invites *us* into this dynamic of divine and human that sits at the very heart of our faith. Like we get to tune into a conference call between Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit – as one preacher I heard put it. As the disciples look at Jesus, they see him as coming out from an immeasurable depth – depicted in icons by this dark background – the depth of God behind with Jesus issuing out of it.

The disciples fell to the ground, overcome by fear. Just picture this awesome blinding light, this cloud that overshadows everything. And they hear the voice of God. Speaking to them – telling them to listen to Jesus. like Simone in the video heard the voice of Jesus. This is not a spectator sport, this is full on immersive audience participation. Things will never be the same after this.

Icons depict the disciples being engulfed by the divine light. This week I came across a fascinating work of art from the 1960s by the artist Dan Flavin. It depicts this scene using fluorescent neon light

strips in an oval, the shape often placed behind Christ in icons of the transfiguration.

Looking at the Flavin strip light mandorla, you are practically blinded by the brightness of the white electric light, conveying the intensity of the light that overcame the disciples. And standing before Flavin's work of art, the observer is bathed in the light, giving again this sense of how the disciples and we can be caught up in the light and in the life of God flowing through Jesus.

It reminds me of the Eucharist when the bread and wine enter our souls and bodies. Our service of Holy Communion is not a passive spectator moment; you, the community of faithful are intimately involved, God comes to be with you in the Eucharist, enters *your* souls and bodies and *you* are caught up in the life of God.

In Matthew's Gospel, this event comes just after Peter has made his proclamation of faith and Jesus has spoken to them about what it means to be disciples of Jesus –denying themselves and taking up their cross. Jesus has told them what it means to go with him, now he invites them deeper into that partnership, to a point where they find themselves drawn into the dynamic of the Father, son and spirit.

We, all of us here, at our different points on our walk with Jesus. We are answering Jesus' invitation to 'come and see' in different ways. The scriptures tell us that if we take up that invitation, if we choose to be with Jesus, it means taking up our cross, it means being part of the action, not just observing from a safe distance.

² Williams, p5

³ Rowan Williams *The Dwelling of the Light: praying with Icons* (Canterbury Press 2003), p9

As we respond to that call, today's Gospel teaches us that the concentric circles of the life of God in the background beckon us towards God and give us the courage to take up that cross. Belief in Jesus is seeing him as the gateway to an endless journey into God's love. That's what the transfiguration taught the three disciples who were with Jesus that day. It's what Simone's experience taught her.

So maybe we need our own transfiguration moments too.

How open are you to the possibility of your own transfiguration? Luke tells us this happened when Jesus went to pray. What are you expecting when you go to pray? Are you expecting transfiguration? Can you hear God saying to you: this is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Because that is what he is saying.

Little old you. As uncertain, doubting, fragile or ill equipped as you might feel, can you allow yourself to imagine that as someone who has taken up Jesus' invitation to come and see, you might find yourself overwhelmed by the divine light, swept up into the glory of God, spoken to as a child of God. You might be the locus for God's work on earth this week, the gateway into God's love. Take time to pray and let yourself dazzle with the light of God so that others are forced to stop dead in their tracks overcome by God's love. As Simone said: "the end results can be more rewarding than what you can ever anticipate".