

Sunday 15 February – Sunday next before Lent

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Catching a glimpse. Sometimes it gives us a stronger image of a thing than a detailed examination up close. I wonder if that is how today's Gospel story was for those three witnesses who caught this briefest glimpse of Jesus' transfiguration. They were the inner circle of the disciples, James and John the sons of the fisherman Zebedee, and Simon Peter, also a fisherman. Reading this account, I was struck by how short it was. They heard nothing of what was said other than that voice at the end saying, "This is my beloved son". Before they can really react in any way, it's all over. A few seconds, a tiny glimpse of future glory.

And I wonder what impression it left on those three witnesses. Why were they given this amazing vision? Was it for encouragement, the events that were to follow would eventually lead to Jesus' death by crucifixion. Did they receive this as a sort of strengthener for the trials just ahead? Or was it more as a confirmation? Just prior to this passage the disciples have told Jesus that they believe Him to be the promised Messiah. Is this vision a heavenly confirmation to them that Jesus really is who they believe Him to be? Maybe it wasn't for the disciples at all, although the Gospel writers never speculate on what was going on in the mind of the Lord, perhaps the transfiguration was as encouragement for Jesus, or even as confirmation. After all, although the disciples have told Jesus that they believe He is the Messiah, it's clear that they have a very different idea of Messiah to Him. Jesus has tried to tell them that He must suffer, even die at the hands of the Romans and Temple authorities. But the disciples' idea of a Messiah is a very different one, they're expecting a triumphant warrior to drive the Romans out of their country. Perhaps the transfiguration is in part for Jesus, a glimpse of His future, and in part for the disciples: listen to what Jesus has to say.

I have preached several times on this story, but it always pays, when approaching a familiar passage of scripture, to pay close attention to exactly what happens and not just scan through it quickly, assuming you already know it well enough. Reading slowly through the story a couple of

details jumped out at me. First, there is the curious response of Peter to what he is witnessing. He says:

"Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Matthew 17:4

That word translated as "dwellings" would perhaps be better translated as "booths" or "tents" or even "tabernacles". Any of those would call to mind the places of divine encounter in the Exodus story: the tent of meeting (Exodus 33:7-10) or the tabernacle for the ark of the covenant (Exodus 40:2, 17-22). But I wonder if Peter's motivation doesn't lie closer to another Exodus story, one that was a consequence of what we heard in our Old Testament reading. When Moses had finished speaking with the Lord on the mountain, his face shone, reflecting the glory of the Lord. Aaron and the other Israelites were afraid to approach him, they could not bear even to look on the reflection of the Lord's glory. I wonder if that sight on the mountain had likewise proved too much for Peter and, like the Israelites in the desert he sought to hide what he couldn't bear to look upon, in tents or booths.

I wonder if sometimes we too seek to hide God's glory because it's too much for us to look upon. Or perhaps we doubt the reality of what we see. Certainly, we don't always seek to share what we know with others, so perhaps like Peter, when confronted with things we don't fully understand we try to hide them, even pretend that they're not actually there at all. Jesus doesn't reply directly to Peter's suggestion, instead Peter is cut off, almost mid-sentence with the voice from heaven saying:

"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"
Matthew 17:5

Unsurprisingly, on hearing this they fall to the ground in fear, something that is a common reaction in the Gospels when something astonishing happens. This is when the second small detail I mentioned occurs as we're told Jesus comes up and touches them. In Matthew, indeed in each of the Gospels, touch is often associated with healing, it even happens when a woman in a crowd touches just the hem of Jesus' cloak - she is healed. So, the touch of Jesus is for the healing of the disciples, healing them of their fear, of their doubts. Enabling them to take on board the words they have

just heard: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!".

Those are exactly the same words as were heard at Jesus' baptism and perhaps explain why this reading was chosen for this particular Sunday, the last one before the season of Lent. At the start of the Epiphany season, we had the Gospel reading describing the baptism of Jesus, so those words of God act as bookends to this Epiphany season, giving exactly the same message, that Jesus is God's (beloved) Son and that we should listen to Him. The first time those words were heard, what follows is Jesus' retreat to the desert for forty days and nights, the events that we commemorate in Lent.

Reading the Bible, worshipping, and praying are some of the ways that we too might glimpse a vision. Jesus and the disciples Peter, James and John had gone apart for a time of reflection. With important events coming up, about to go into Jerusalem for Passover, they sought guidance. They used this brief period of time for a sort of spiritual refuelling. They had travelled up and down the country spreading the good news of the Messiah. Through what Jesus had told them they knew that they were heading into the climax of His ministry. From the way He had been talking about it they must have been quite daunted. Jesus himself, who truly knew what was about to happen must have been apprehensive. By seeking out the Father they received a glimpse of what was to be and as we've already considered a glimpse can sometimes be the most powerful image of all. Let us in our Lenten discipline this year seek also a glimpse of God's mysteries. Amen.