

SUNDAY 11 AUGUST 2024 – 11 AFTER TRINITY

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF CHRIST

DANIEL 7.9-10, 13-14

(2 PETER 1.16-19)

LUKE 9.28-36

During the past week an event occurred, or rather was commemorated, which attracted my attention: nothing to do with the terrible events in Southport and everything which has happened in different parts of the country since, but it was The Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

It's a word which we don't exactly use in everyday conversation. In fact it is a word that we don't use at all, except in the context of the event itself. My dictionary tells me that the word comes direct from Latin: *trans* meaning across, beyond or through, and *figura* meaning form or appearance, so you could equate it with transformation. The dictionary goes on to say that in the Christian context (which is the only context) transfiguration means glorification. So something big seems to be happening here, and not for the first time.

We first come across transfiguration in the early part of the Bible, in the Book of Exodus, in which Moses comes down from Mount Sinai carrying two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments are set out, which he has received from God. The Israelites have been misbehaving, choosing to worship the Golden Calf, etc. Moses is at his wits' end to know how to exert his authority over his impatient and dissatisfied people, who are stuck in the wilderness. What he doesn't realise when he comes down from the mountain is that his face is shining, and this has the desired effect of bringing the Israelites to their senses and making them realise they have a man of God in their midst. God has made his point. In both the first and second books of Kings it is Elijah who is the only prophet who actually gets to talk to God and perform a miracle on God's behalf, and when he dies he doesn't die a normal death but is suddenly taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire, in full view of his successor the prophet Elisha – which is about as near as you can get to transfiguration.

I mention both Moses and Elijah, because of course they both play a role in the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. God is making an

extraordinarily significant point here: he is making the all-important link between his actions on behalf of his chosen people the Jews throughout the Old Testament and in particular is raising up Moses and Elijah as the finest examples of people who remained faithful to him, through thick and thin (and there was a lot of thin) – he is making a link between them and what he is doing in the New Testament in sending his son Jesus Christ, “in whom he is well pleased”. Daniel, a much later prophet, waxes lyrical about who is to come in the fullness of time.

Three disciples (Peter, James and John) are permitted to witness this scene with Moses and Elijah and God’s voice coming out of the clouds. Not surprisingly, the disciples fall to the ground in great fear as they realise what they have seen: the glory of God manifesting itself in a shining Jesus, their friend. They slightly miss the point in offering to build dwellings on the mountain for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, but you sense their hearts are in the right place.

In Matthew 17 there is a revealing discussion when the disciples ask why the Jewish prophecy is not being fulfilled that before the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) comes Elijah will come again. Jesus explains to them that Elijah has indeed returned in the person of John the Baptist, but that his words have not been heeded. Jesus is always keen to maintain continuity of the narrative between what was prophesied and promised by God in the past and what is happening now.

Throughout this account of the Transfiguration there is a strong flavour of the baptism of Jesus by John. This was an equally dramatic event, witnessed by John the Baptist and a few others, which served to impress them by the sound of God’s voice and the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, so as to leave no room for doubt about the origins of Jesus.

So where does all this mystery and magnificence leave us ? We cannot know or promise that we will be transfigured in the exact sense that Jesus was, but we can and do pray that we may be transformed by our membership of the Christian family. This does not happen immediately, but either through our parents, godparents or friends or through this community of faith here at St Mary’s, and most importantly of all by the will of God through his Holy Spirit, we will come to learn and grow in this Christian faith. It is a lifetime’s journey.

But how can we do this on a daily basis ? When we are amongst our friends in church on a Sunday and all fired up by the Holy Spirit, it seems straightforward enough, doesn't it ? But then we go off to work or whatever else we have to do during the week, and suddenly we lose sight of our faith or find it very difficult to put it into practice. All I can do is offer a couple of tips which helped me a lot: firstly, take time each day to pray and in the middle of the week go to a church service near where we work or where we are, and meet other Christians for a chat about issues which concern us; secondly, have a go at trying to see an image of Jesus Christ in everyone we come across and, equally importantly, remember to reflect that image ourselves. Our Christian faith is a demanding calling, but we owe it to God to do our best, when we learn what he has done for us in sending his son to die so that our failings might be forgiven and we might have the assurance of eternal life with Him.

In this small way – actually it is not so small at all – we can try to live our lives according to the example of Jesus Christ, and can trust in the Holy Spirit that finally we will be transformed – yes, transfigured and even glorified into his likeness and so eventually take our place among the saints. This last week we have seen both a disfiguration of his likeness in the perpetrators of violence and hate as well as a transfiguration of the ordinary citizens of Southport and elsewhere. As Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians: “For it is the God who said ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ”, and of decent people everywhere.