



Sermon preached by Revd John Proctor on 11th February 2024
Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:2-6; Mark 9:2-9

If God intended people in Cambridge to read the Bible, it is surprising that so much of the action is set on high mountains. Well, I jest a little. But still – Moses with the ten commandments on Mount Sinai; Elijah waiting on the hillside for the still small, voice of God; Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount; and now this Transfiguration, ‘up a high mountain’. Does God do anything important on flat ground?

But perhaps this shift of scene is actually quite helpful. Part of the telling is that this venue is remote from normal experience – not just ours, but normal experience in that part of the world too. Jesus took his friends ‘apart, by themselves’. The mountain is one aspect of that drawing aside. In the area where Jesus grew up people farmed, fished, engaged in small-scale manufacture, largely home-based, and bought and sold what they grew, caught and made. None of that required hitting the heights. A mountain was not a place you would visit often, if ever.

Which is part of the point: the Transfiguration is a hardly-ever sort of event – a shining from beyond, exposure to reality that we do not regularly engage with, a glimpse of glory in a dull and dusty world, majesty amid the mundane, heaven on a hilltop. That’s what I think this episode in the gospel is trying to communicate. There is more to God than our senses could ever easily absorb. And there is something very particular of God, something of that ‘more’, about Jesus.

Jesus represents, he embodies and he activates goodness and glory that human life cannot create from within itself. Here he beckons his friends into the edges of that glory. The experiences and achievements of our living do not really reach this place – ‘white as no one on earth could bleach them’. Our plans and perceptions are not relevant – ‘let us make three booths’ – Simon Peter didn’t know what to say. This event steps beyond what we are used to, what we can manage, control or describe.

In Mark’s Gospel the Transfiguration does not quite stand alone. It’s tied in a curious bond, a kind of mirroring, an inside-out sort of symmetry, to the verses just before it. That last part of chapter eight will be read in church in two weeks’ time, so you will hear it then. But here are some thoughts about how these two episodes might hang together.

Who is Jesus?

John the Baptist? Elijah?

Messiah – **but don’t tell**

He is **SUFFERING SON OF MAN**

(which Peter cannot stand) *

and he **calls people to follow**

He is **GLORIOUS SON OF GOD**

*** (which Peter cannot understand)**

and God **calls people to listen**

don’t tell – but what about

Elijah, and John the Baptist?

The last part of chapter 8 is on the left, and the first part of chapter 9, the Transfiguration, on the right. Here is some detail.

The starting point is Jesus’ question, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ Who is Jesus? People say John the Baptist, or Elijah, his friends tell him. He is neither. But who he is, he sternly orders his friends

not to tell.

Then Jesus talks of his suffering and death. The Son of Man must suffer. Unthinkable – a murdered Messiah. Yet he speaks with clarity and conviction and calls people to follow: take up the cross.

Now to the right-hand column, to the counterpoint to all of this in the Transfiguration. Suffering Son of Man, and now glorious Son of God. Yet the voice calls his friends to take it seriously – ‘Listen to him’. Heed Jesus. Embrace what he has just told you: which was, Take up the cross.

And when we come back down the mountain, as the gospel moves back from reflection – who is Jesus? – to encounter with human need, a warning not to tell, for the moment at least. Then his friends ask him about Elijah, to which Jesus replies with, ‘Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased.’ Code, perhaps, for the martyrdom of John the Baptist, who had prepared the way for the Messiah as Jewish people expected Elijah to do. Bracketing the whole episode with the two figures mentioned at the start – but neither of these is Jesus. He stands alone.

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Finally, one more small echo between these two bits of text: Peter's stumbling attempts to say the right thing. When he heard Jesus speak of sombre events ahead, he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him: ‘You mustn't suffer.’ Then on the mountaintop, ‘May we make three booths for you and Moses and Elijah?’ But you can't stand in the way of God's saving work, nor contain glory in a human construction.

It may be that not all the details in these comparisons quite work, but I think the main point stands: Jesus embraces an experience of deepest darkness – suffering, rejection, death; and Jesus is enveloped in a vision of brightest light – honour, acclamation, endorsement. There is a kind of inverse symmetry between cross and Transfiguration, a mirroring that turns the image inside-out. Earth rejects and heaven affirms. Misery is ahead and glory is at hand. The light on the mountain of Transfiguration and the darkness at noon on Good Friday somehow reveal Jesus in tandem – neither eclipses the other. We find meaning through seeing them together. Rejection and glory; suffering and Sonship; passion and power; light and love.



That's one reason this picture helps me. The one who shows his glory privately on a mountaintop will be revealed publicly in a place of degradation and suffering. This is what God does – immersed in the pain and brutality of the world, exposed to the gaze of the world, reaching out in love to the world. The one who dies will do so not merely as tragedy or travesty – although both of those are part of the meaning of the crucifixion – but as a deliberate commitment to a path of service, embracing human suffering and shame and turning it into love, good news and hope.

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With the cross, it is not just that rejection and revelation stand side by side, as in the middle of the

gospel – suffering put next to splendour, grimness giving way to glory. But in the crucifixion the two aspects are wrapped around each other. The place of rejection is the place of revelation. Disclosed in the darkness is the one who is light of the world.

‘Truly this man was Son of God,’ says the centurion at the cross, echoing back the voice from the Mount of Transfiguration, ‘My Son, the Beloved.’ Earth discovers what heaven has always known. Earth discovers it because the love of heaven has embraced the ugliness of earth. God is there in the pain, heat, dirt and blood. The one who is transfigured is also the one who goes to be disfigured. The glory is not cancelled out. It is refracted, radiated, through a torn curtain, darkness at noon and the tears of friends.

I spoke about Cambridge as an odd place to think about a mountaintop. Curiously one of the best writers on the Transfiguration was a native of this city, indeed a son of this congregation. Michael Ramsey was born here in 1904. His father was an active and prominent member of Emmanuel Church, now part of Downing Place. Michael himself became an Anglican as a young man, served as a parish priest, as a university teacher, and eventually in the 1960s as Archbishop of Canterbury. Ramsey wrote a good deal on Christian themes, notably on *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* – 1949 and still listed – and he certainly helped me to think about this part of the gospel.

So to end with a brief excerpt from that book, very near the end. There Michael Ramsey gathered a lot of what he wrote by saying that in the Transfiguration the whole of God’s work is seen in one moment:

‘Here we perceive,’ he wrote,
‘that the living and the dead are one in Christ,
that the old covenant and the new are inseparable,
that the cross and the glory are of one,
that the age to come is already here,
that our human nature has a destiny in glory,
that in Christ the final word is uttered
and in Him alone the Father is well pleased.’

We’ll leave those words on screen for a minute. You may want to reflect on them, as we hear some music, *May eternal light shine upon them.*