

**7 Feb 2016 Sunday before Lent Transfiguration Ex. 34. 29-end, 2.Cor. 3. 12-4.2, Luke 9. 28-36**

On the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 651, a young man called Cuthbert was keeping watch in the Lammermuir Hills. He was guarding a flock of sheep and while the shepherds slept, it was his job to stay awake and protect the flock from robbers and raiders. It was a clear night, the sky full of stars and, as he gazed at them he had a vision of angels descending to the earth and ascending again, carrying a holy soul up to heaven. At first he didn't understand what this could be, but he knew it required a response from him, so the next day he went down to Melrose and entered the monastery there. A few days later, he discovered that the great saint Aidan had died the night of his vision and realised that it was his soul being carried up by the angels. Cuthbert was destined to become Aidan's successor.

This story, like the story of the transfiguration, confronts us with the reality of another world - the spiritual world, which lies behind or beyond the material world we are familiar with. The Celtic people had and still have the concept of 'thin places', places where it is easier to sense the presence of the other world. Many people sense this to be true, for example, on Holy Island in Northumbria. Maybe you know of a place that is like that for you. Certainly, on the mountain of the Transfiguration, for a brief moment, the veil that hides the other world from us was pulled back and Jesus, who belonged to both worlds, while still on earth, took on the splendour appropriate to the glory of the other world.

What happened here? Well, Jesus took Peter and James and John with him up this mountain and what happened then was a scene full of echoes of the Old Testament. Moses also had gone up a mountain to talk with God and Moses' face had also become radiant. Then the disciples saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus about his departure, which was going to happen in Jerusalem. And, as on Mount Sinai, the presence of God was seen by onlookers to be like a cloud covering the mountain, and out of the cloud God's voice was heard, 'This is my Son, my chosen one, listen to him!'

Peter had blurted out something about putting up shelters – he didn't really know what he was saying. The disciples were bewildered and confused as to what was happening. We too are often confused and bewildered in trying to understand what God is doing or saying to us at the time, both in moments of great joy and exhilaration, and in times of great sadness and difficulty, when everything seems to go pear shaped and we ask ourselves, 'what is God doing in all this?' But the word that comes to us, even when we have not got a clue as to what's going on, is the word that came from the cloud on that mountain top, 'this is my Son, my chosen one, listen to him!'

This time on the mount of the Transfiguration is the moment of revelation for the disciples when they see Jesus for who he really is, the fulfilment of the Law as given by Moses and of the many prophecies of the prophets, represented by Elijah. In a way, it is not so much a revelation, as a confirmation, since just eight days before, Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was and Peter had replied that Jesus was the promised Messiah. At that time Jesus had told them that he knew he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and be put to death. It was hard for the disciples to accept this, but here were Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus about his departure from Jerusalem, so the truth of it was confirmed for them.

This was not only a moment of revelation for the disciples, it was a very important experience for Jesus. It was to be the turning point of Jesus' life, the moment of decision, and it is the hinge on which the whole gospel narrative hangs. The position of Mount Tabor, where the Transfiguration is traditionally sited, is very significant. It lies between Galilee and Samaria. You can look both ways from it – up north to Galilee, or south towards Jerusalem. Standing on this mountain, Jesus could

look back towards Galilee, where all his ministry had been so far, where the crowds had flocked to hear him preach and see him heal. Or he could look the other way, first towards Jerusalem, and he knew what terrible things awaited him there. He knew that that was his Father's will for him, but he still had a choice, and what a hard choice that must have been – to turn back into what had been a very successful ministry, or to go forward towards rejection, humiliation and suffering.

Jesus was after all fully human and knew what it was to suffer pain. He could only choose to go forward in obedience to his Father's will for him because he had this mountain-top experience in which he is assured of the support of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, and the seal of approval of his Father in heaven, who confirms to him his status as Son, as chosen and beloved one. It is because of this profound reassurance that he can decide courageously to go forward.

It must have been a moment of decision for the disciples also – to go back towards home, where life was more comfortable and familiar, or to go forward with Jesus down the other side of the mountain to face whatever new difficulties and challenges awaited them. And indeed they had no sooner gone down the other side, when they were confronted by the problem of the demon-afflicted boy, whom the disciples could not heal. Many difficulties lay ahead for them too.

It can be a turning point in our lives also, when we see Jesus for who he really is, when we have something like a mountain top experience, a moment of revelation. Such moments can come through other people, who prophetically speak God's word to us, as Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus. Was there a moment when God spoke to you through some other person (a teacher, preacher or friend) and it made all a difference to you? Once when I was preaching in Vienna as a lay reader, afterwards one of the congregation, a West Indian lady who I hardly knew, came up to me and said, 'you really are a priest'. Up till then this thought had not really entered my mind. It was like a prophetic word for me.

It could be through something we read (Henri Nouwen's 'The Prodigal' was such a revelation for me); it could be a word of Scripture in which we heard God speaking to us, or through looking at a great work of art, or hearing a sublime piece of music – any moment when for an instant the veil between this world and the next is drawn back. These are moments with the potential to transform our lives, but they also require a decision – to go forward or stay back – just as Jesus had to decide, and as Cuthbert had to decide to stay with his old life, or to go forward to the monastery and God's calling for him.

We can look back and go back to how things were before, which may seem easier and less challenging. Or we can decide to go forward to whatever awaits us in our journey with Jesus. It may involve difficulties, even suffering, but one thing is certain, we cannot stay on the mountain top. We have to come back to everyday reality and if these moments of transfiguration are to bear any fruit, there needs to be an outworking of them in our daily lives.

As St Paul sees it, we enter into a process of being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ with ever increasing glory, as he tells the church in Corinth. This sounds rather grandiose and ambitious, but it is not our achievement. It is the work of the Holy Spirit within us. What is up to us is the decision to go forward with Christ and be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. When we see Christ for who he really is and welcome him into our lives, we also become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and it is his work to transform us bit by bit into the likeness of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. All one can say is 'Hallelujah'!

Let's end with a prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the times when you have revealed yourself to us and enabled us to see Christ more clearly. As we decide to walk forward with you, may your Holy Spirit be at work in us to transform us more and more into the likeness of Christ. Amen.