

It began early in the morning. A subdued, early breakfast, a short but quiet journey to the foot of the mountain. And there the peace stopped, as the crowds mingled and jostled, all waiting for their bus up to the top of the Mount of Transfiguration. A myriad of languages being spoken ever louder to be heard, people scrabbling for change for the toilets that were twice as expensive as anywhere else, tour guides frantically trying to herd their groups, the taxi operators trying to get people on board and the taxis off as quickly as humanly possible. And then the drive up, which for the drivers is as obvious as our most frequent drive, but for you every new hairpin bend, which is NOT slowed down for, is a new threat of plummeting off the mountain! And that's without meeting another taxi coming the other way right on the bend. But then you arrive, high up above all the chaos below. And a silence descends. Maybe it is the holiness of the place, maybe it is the sheer height, maybe it is that knowledge that somewhere on this mountain the Transfiguration of Our Lord took place. It's almost seven years to the day when I first stood on Mount Tabor, and yet every detail of that visit I still recall.

The Transfiguration of Jesus is an event central to the Synoptic Gospels and one which infuses John's gospel even if he never actually relates the event. And yet one which doesn't feature in our creed or in much of our discussion

about the person of Christ. And so, a good opportunity for us to consider afresh this morning the meaning of the Transfiguration for us here today, as we stand on the brink of Lent.

We do an injustice to our texts when we are too busy or too interested in historicity or otherwise to notice the details our authors have given us. The locations of our OT and Gospel readings are important. We are on mountain tops, something in us should sit up and pay attention. Because for the cultures of the Ancient Near East mountaintops were “considered pillars of the earth, holding the sky in place. With its head reaching towards the heavens, the mountain or high place is the bridge between earth, the realm of humans, and the heavens, the realms of the gods. As such, a mountain is the place for divine encounter.”¹ The tops of mountains are dangerous places in the Old Testament, one’s life is never quite the same and for some unlucky souls, like the prophets of Baal, they never come down again!

Unsurprisingly then Matthew has a soft spot for mountains. We know that Matthew has constructed his gospel in 5 blocks of Jesus’ teaching, and some

¹ Judy Fentress-Williams, *Feasting on the Word, Year A volume 1*, p.437

Year A
Sunday next before Lent
Exodus 24:12-end
2 Peter 1:16-end
Matthew 17:1-9

commentators have tried to shape that around five mountains, the only problem being that there are six mountains in Matthew! This morning, we are on the second of three in three weeks. Last week we had the sermon on the mount, today the Transfiguration, next week we will be with Jesus on the high place as Satan offers him the kingdoms of the world. In weeks to come as Lent turns into Holy Week we will be with Jesus on the Mount of Olives as he wrestles in Gethsemane, we will stand at the foot of the cross as he hangs on the hill outside of Jerusalem. And then we will stand on the mountain in Galilee as he ascends to heaven. So, a note to us all this morning, when we have a reading in Matthew that features a mountain sit up and pay attention!

It is also of note that the Transfiguration happens after Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, and, in Matthew, on the way to Jerusalem, we are on the path to the cross, to death and to resurrection. For Matthew the disciples can only understand this event after the resurrection. It has stayed with them, played in their minds and suddenly makes sense. For Peter it clearly stays with him until his death, the writer of the letter in his name must have had that impressed on them.

By the time this letter “is being written the apostles’ eyewitness account is being used to give heart to a community that is beginning to doubt. They are beginning to suspect that they have been sold a line, no different from the stories that the other cults put out. They had almost certainly converted to Christianity in the expectation that the world would soon end, and they would be on the winning side. But as the second coming delayed, so they began to wonder if they had backed the right horse, after all. In this context, the writer of the epistle is offering them the strongest possible proof that Christ is the one approved by God – he is offering them a witness, who speaks from his own experience.”² Be attentive he says, to the glory of God, to the lamp in the darkness, the day dawning, the morning star. All images we can resonate with after our dull dreary start to this year. Be attentive to the eyewitnesses of his majesty, the anchoring point of faith.

We are invited to be attentive this morning on the mountaintop, to come with our doubts or frustrations, our anxieties and our fear, and to be attentive to the glory of who Christ is. To lift our eyes from the news surrounding us

² Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year A*, p.40

every day of the pursuit of power, wealth, pleasure, and influence in the most horrific ways. To lift our eyes from the mess that the House of Bishops and General Synod have consistently made on matters that affect real human lives and experiences. And yes, to lift our eyes from the ongoing physical gloom around us, we are embodied creatures living in a physical world, the seasons do affect us. But here on this mountaintop, at this time we are invited to behold glory. The glory of Jesus' humanity transformed into deity and with it all of our humanity. We are invited to lift our eyes and see the potential of humanity in God, our nature utterly transformed.

There is a beautiful phrase in the Gospel that it is easy to pass over. When the disciples hear the Divine Voice, they fall to the ground in fear and Matthew tells us, "But Jesus came and touched them...". The touch of another human, the touch of God become human. It reminds us that we don't have to climb to high places to find God, God has become us to be found by us. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself," as St Paul reminds us. God has become human that we might be made divine.

You and I are called to that journey to become more Christ-like through prayer, listening to God, the Sacrament, through our service of God and each

other and through our witness. The more we become like Christ, the more we show the glory of Christ in the world around us. **We** are eyewitnesses of his majesty.

Matthew re-writes Mark's version of the Transfiguration to have Moses before Elijah so that he can lead us to see Jesus as greater than the Law and the Prophets. Like the inner circle of the disciples on the mountain, he wants our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. He wants us to hear the divine voice affirm Jesus' identity, and he wants us to experience the touch of Christ in our fear and anxiety. Both of our readings finish still on the mountain top, but we know that Moses came down and had a 40-year wander in the wilderness. We know that the disciples come down and will face the harshness of the passion that will expose their 'little faith'. We know that on Wednesday we will be marked with ash and be reminded of our mortality as we embark on the journey of Lent.

But know this, Lent is not a solitary journey that we are dispatched on, some kind of spiritual obstacle course at the end of which, if we're lucky or really masochistic enough we might find God. Lent is a journey with God, into God, supported and empowered by God. It is about taking the time, getting rid of

Year A
Sunday next before Lent
Exodus 24:12-end
2 Peter 1:16-end
Matthew 17:1-9

the distractions to lift our eyes and behold the glory of Christ and the glory of our transformed humanity. To be attentive to the ongoing work of conversion in us. To be transformed from glory into glory.

The Transfiguration of Jesus shows us the glory of humanity transformed in God's glory, it shows us our potential. Lent offers us a pilgrimage into that potential. As with the disciples on the mount of Transfiguration Jesus comes to us this morning in word and sacrament and touches us, and say, "get up, and do not be afraid."