

Sermon for 27th February 2022. Year C. The Transfiguration.

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Cor 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36 (37-43).

Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden

Sermon

Once upon a time, there were two brothers who became Christians together as young men. The older brother took the faith very seriously, gave away much of the money he earned, and pursued a life of service to the poor. He lost the only true love of his life and since he was poor, his health also suffered, and he died in his fifties, almost alone.

Now the younger brother found great success in business, married a beautiful wife and had three sons and two daughters. He had a comfortable house and many friends, and didn't take his faith too seriously, or give much to charity, but he always worshipped on Sunday. Eventually, after a long and prosperous life into his eighties, he died with his wife and family gathered around him at his bedside.

In heaven, both brothers are called together by God, who warmly welcomes and embraces them, and gives them an equal share in the Kingdom. At first, the older brother is surprised. After all, he had sacrificed everything to serve God, while his younger brother had enjoyed a comfortable and rather selfish life. However, his surprise was not resentful but joyous. "Today," he said, "my joy is complete, for we are together once again. Come my brother, let us break bread together". In response his brother said nothing, but fell at his feet, and wept over all the opportunities to show love that he had squandered.

You may well wonder what this story (which I borrowed from Northern Irish philosopher Pete Rollins) has to do with the story of the Transfiguration which we heard in our gospel reading today. The connection is in the transformation that occurs when someone has an epiphany about what God is really like, and it totally changes their life.

In Pete Rollins' story, the younger brother has got it made. He's a believer, he's blessed with wealth and a loving family, he does his duty, pays his taxes, lives a

long, contented life and so on. The big surprise is not that he gets into heaven – we might expect that of a forgiving, generous, loving God. The big surprise is that he receives the same reward as his much more holy brother, who responds not with resentment but with joy. It is this totally unjust but joyously loving divine act that causes scales to fall from the younger brother's eyes and he sees for the first time the overwhelming reality of the God of Love. In response, he falls to his knees as he suddenly sees his whole life from this completely new perspective and realises how much more good he could have done for those around him.

The clearer we see God as God really is, the more we are transformed to become full of love and kindness and generosity ourselves. If we think we don't deserve love, unexpectedly receiving it can change us in an instant.

Perhaps there have been examples of this in your own life? Has anything ever happened to you that made you see everything that had gone before in a completely new way, so that you became a different person?

The disciples Peter, James and John certainly have this sort of experience on the mountaintop with Jesus. Until this point, they have only seen Jesus as a human teacher and leader. They perhaps think he's going to lead a rebellion against the Romans and restore the spiritual virtues of ancient Israel. They've just figured out that he's the messiah, but a very human messiah who they hope will shortly become a very human king.

Like most of humanity, their attention was almost certainly on their everyday concerns and personal conflicts. They're determined to make Jesus the vehicle of their worldly ambitions. Many people today use Jesus in the same way – a tool to support their own goals of power.

But Jesus' glory on the mountaintop rends the veil of their blinkered horizontal world from top to bottom. He makes the sign of the cross over the whole tapestry of history so that whatever we think is going on from our human perspective, God's glory breaks through reminding us that there is another, far greater, and yet far more humbling divine story going on.

Transfiguration is about the kingdom of heaven suddenly breaking into our human world. For many of us, this moment occurs when like the brother in the story we are unexpectedly shown mercy, grace, or forgiveness even though we know that we absolutely don't deserve it. This is when the veil is lifted, and we see God for who he really is. And we're left flabbergasted and awed and shaken, just like Peter gabbling on about building dwellings and how good it is for them to be there.

I do have sympathy for Peter. Once, when I was a novice nun at Malling Abbey, The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams came to visit us. My brain totally seized up and my attempt to impress him with my sharp theological wisdom turned into a garbled invitation to eat another lovely piece of cake, and *will you not have more tea, your archbishopness?* If we are not completely overwhelmed by awe and gabbling nonsense in response to God, then we have not yet truly encountered God. Not that Rowan Williams is God, but sometimes when you were in his presence it could certainly feel like it!

And so, after their experience on the mountain, the disciples Peter, James and John see Jesus in a completely different light – a divine manifestation of light – and their perspective on everything that Jesus is doing is changed. And it is the same for us, reading the bible today, and calling out to God in our prayers. We too need to come to a realisation, an epiphany if you will, that Jesus is not only human but also divine, and we need to see everything he does, and everything we are, in the light of that revelation.

If Jesus truly is God, the God of Love, what does it mean for our lives? Does it put anything into a new perspective? Does it change what's important to us?

After experiencing the awe of transfiguration, our lives must go on, in some ways changed, but in other ways perhaps not so much, at least not at first. James and John, who actually *witnessed* the transfiguration, who heard God say, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him," they later go to Jesus and ask to be seated at his left and his right in his glory. They were still missing the point: The glory comes from love and humility. Sometimes the holy transformation takes a little while to settle in!

And while all this is going on up the mountainside, the other disciples are busily and unsuccessfully trying to cure a boy with seizures. None of them really understand that Jesus' glory is not a matter of power, but the giving up of power, of humiliation, of going to the Cross, which is the inevitable consequence when the vertical revelation of God's self-emptying love intersects with the distorted horizontal world of human ambition, with all its fear, hatred, greed, and violence. Mountaintop experiences of grace and mercy transfigure and change us, but experiences must always end. Moses' face shone when he returned from meeting with God, but eventually even that faded. Transfiguration loses its power if we don't also come down the mountain and, like Jesus, respond to the need we find before us.

The important thing then, is not the mountaintop experience of glory, but the transformed perspective it gives to us, and the knowledge that sometimes transfiguration occurs when and where you least expect it.

There is of course one transfiguration that we always share together, and it's called the Eucharist. We gather together with our horizontal concerns, arm in arm we come to the table with all our anxieties, and through the historical words of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is called down into the bread and wine, and it and we become the Eternal Christ together, to be sent out in peace to love and to serve the world.

So may *our* eyes be opened to see God's glory, here, now and always, the glory as of God's beloved son, full of grace and truth.