

SERMON FOR THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – TRANSFIGURATION A

It is safe to say that our modern world is filled with uncertainty. Whether it be the state of our economy, the rising cost of living, our divisive political landscape and the polarisation of our public discourse, as well as international tensions and uncertainties, we have an unclear picture where our world is heading.

Hopefully, as Christians, we can trust that God is with us in these uncertainties. This has been the theme of the Sundays after Epiphany, which began with Jesus' Baptism and end with Jesus' Transfiguration and which begin and end with a heavenly voice making Jesus known to the world.

The template for the Transfiguration in Matthew's gospel is quite clearly our first reading from the Book of Exodus. Both experiences occur on mountains; both involve Moses; both mention "six days,"; both have three companions as well as the central figure; both happen on a mountaintop; and both have God speaking from a cloud. And, just as Moses went down into the valley from the mountaintop to deal with unfaithful followers, so does Jesus.

We pick up the Exodus story with Moses being commanded to go up the mountain once again to receive the Ten Commandments, after Moses had destroyed the first tablets in anger after learning that his brother Aaron has led the people into idolatry by fashioning the golden calf.

Once again, Moses alone goes up to be with his God. The mountain is covered by a cloud, a sign in Scripture of God's presence. In the murkiness of the cloud the glory of God settles on the mountain, and for six days there is silence. On day seven God calls to Moses who enters the fiery cloud and then spends forty days and forty nights with God, mirroring in days the years the people of Israel had wandered through the wilderness.

It is no surprise that this episode has been chosen by those who put together the weekly readings to go together with Matthew's account of Jesus' transfiguration.

We are told that Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. This is the first time the "inner three" of Peter, James and John are set apart in Matthew. The next time Jesus takes them with him is in the Garden of Gethsemane. And in both cases, on the mountain and in the garden the three disciples react poorly, especially Peter. On the mountain Peter wants to build booths, and God has to interrupt his plans. In the Garden Jesus tells them to stay awake and pray, but they fall asleep three times.

And "Jesus was transfigured before them". The Greek word translated "transfigured" is *metamorphoomai*, from which we get the English word, *metamorphosis*. And so a change or transformation happens to Jesus' appearance, and his face shone like the sun, which mirrors Moses appearance when he comes down off the mountain after speaking with God, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Then, suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. The appearance of Moses and Elijah represents the law and prophets which have been fulfilled in Jesus.

Observing all this, Peter, in typical Peter fashion, declares, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." The

word translated as 'dwellings' can be translated in a number of ways. It can mean a "tent" or "temporary shelter." It can mean "tabernacle" as in the dwelling place of God in the Temple in Jerusalem, or it can also mean a "house", suggesting a more permanent dwelling place. Peter's response is often seen as a desire to capture the glorious moment and to preserve or, at least, prolong this moment on the mountain.

There can be a tendency to be a bit hard on Peter for saying this. He and the other two disciples are probably a bit dazzled, perplexed, probably more than a little overwhelmed, but also, excited to be witnessing this event. And wishing to pay suitable honour to the distinguished guests, Peter offers to make dwelling places for them.

But it seems that God is not particularly pleased with Peter's response, as Matthew writes, "While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" God interrupts Peter and talks over the top of him, cutting him off in order first to pronounce Jesus blessed and then to command that the disciples listen to Jesus.

To listen is a crucial characteristic of discipleship in Matthew's gospel. But how do we listen to Jesus? Well, for Matthew, listening to Jesus means listening to his teaching, seeking to understand what Jesus means and to take up one's cross and follow.

At this point though, the three disciples are not much interested in listening. Hearing the voice from the cloud, the disciples "fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." I'm always encouraged by the disciples of Jesus, especially the inner three of Peter, James and John. Because if these are the "best of the disciples," perhaps there is hope for all of us who wish to follow Jesus.

Jesus comes to the trembling disciples and touches them, which is always an act of healing in Matthew, and tells them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." The word that is translated 'get up' is used later in Matthew's gospel to describe the resurrection of Jesus. So a more accurate translation would be, "be raised up." Or even, "be resurrected."

These frightened disciples, who are hiding their heads; are raised by Jesus to a new life. And it is not the shiny, glorious Jesus who does it, but "regular" Jesus who comes and touches and reassures the disciples.

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. When all else fades away, Jesus remains, reaching out in reassurance and healing.

And like Moses, Jesus comes down the mountain once again and continues his journey towards Jerusalem. There he will be tried, condemned, and crucified, for the world has no place for the hope he offers. And we too are about to begin that journey this week on Ash Wednesday as we too descend down the mountain of Transfiguration and travel the road through Lent, anticipating the glory of Easter Day, showing again that even in the uncertain times we find ourselves in, we need not be afraid.