

**ADDRESS FOR 11th FEBRUARY 2018**  
**SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE LENT**

A few years ago I saw a Time Team programme about two bodies discovered in an Irish bog. Neither body was intact, but the remaining bits were in such an excellent state of preservation that it was difficult to believe they dated from approximately 300 BC. Just looking at the remains with the naked eye was enough to learn a fair amount about the physical characteristics of two men who lived more than 2000 years ago; for example, impressive arm and shoulder muscles; short, well kept nails; on one of them, an abundant head of hair, dressed in a very distinctive style. But it was just *one* of those hairs which fascinated me most, because when it was examined under a microscope the detail of its structure was revealed, and the subsequent scientific analysis provided a host of information about lifestyle and diet and so on. The whole process was, you might say, a revelation.

The story of the Transfiguration has long given rise to all sorts of sceptical speculation. It has been dismissed as a kind of group hallucination (dark murmurings about magic mushrooms, for example!), or simply wishful thinking on the part of the gospel writers – a claim which Peter vigorously denies in the first chapter of his second letter when he states “We did not follow **cleverly devised myths** when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eye witnesses of his majesty – for he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory saying “This is my Son, my Beloved”. We ourselves heard this voice from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain”.

The writings and traditions of many faiths, Jewish and Christian among them, tell of events, when, as the theologian Tom Wright puts it, “the veil of ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing the “inside” of a situation is drawn back, and a fuller reality is disclosed.” Just as the “fuller reality” contained in a single hair was unveiled by the microscope and scientific analysis. Of course, most of us don't have this sort of experience, but that doesn't mean it can't happen. It **has** happened, it still does happen to some people. As Hamlet said “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”.

And it also has to be said that the “cleverly devised myths” which Peter refers to also have their place. The importance of a myth is that though the story may not be literally true, it nevertheless contains great truth. Take that account of Elijah being taken up to heaven which we heard a few moments ago. Nobody can vouch for the literal truth of that story, but what a picture the whirlwind, and the chariots and horses of fire presents of the awesome power and glory of God – and of his relationship with his servant Elijah. A perfect example of what William Loader calls “symbolic narrative”.

Whatever your point of view, to understand the full significance of the Transfiguration story, it must be considered in context, because in Mark's gospel it is one of a series of linked events which begin in Bethsaida on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus heals a blind man. The man's eyes are opened, and Jesus hopes that with yet another example of God's love and power in action, the eyes of his

disciples will also be opened to the "fuller reality" of God's Kingdom, and the true nature of the promised Messiah.

Then they leave Bethsaida, and travel north to Caesarea Philippi. Perhaps Jesus deliberately chooses this long, lonely walk because the time has come for him to broach a serious subject, and he wants to be free of the crowds. As they are walking, Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, and Peter, with all his impulsive enthusiasm, makes his famous confession of faith. "You are the Messiah" he says. But then Jesus immediately begins to talk about his suffering and death, and it's all so contrary to the popular expectations about the Messiah that Peter thinks Jesus has got it all wrong, and says so - and gets more than he bargains for in reply! "Get behind me, Satan!" says Jesus "You're thinking human thoughts, not God's thoughts!" Strong words between friends! I imagine that there were a lot of long silences for the remainder of that walk.

Then, a week later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John, up a mountain, probably Mount Hermon, and the whole issue comes to a head. Before their very eyes, Jesus is transfigured; the dazzling whiteness of his clothes is, again to quote Tom Wright, "a sign of Jesus being entirely bathed in the love and power of God, so that it transforms his whole being with light." It's what Paul means when he talks, in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, which is the designated Epistle for today, about "**the light of the gospel of glory in the face of Jesus Christ.**" It is a confirmation that Peter has been absolutely right to acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, but completely wrong in his understanding of what that Messiahship means. He and the others have been thinking in human terms, but here on the mountain, just for a moment, they have a glimpse of a power and a glory far beyond what any earthly Messiah could aspire to, a glimpse of what the kingdom of God is like, of what God himself is all about. And Jesus isn't alone. Moses, the Law-giver and Elijah the Prophet, the two greatest figures in Jewish history, who themselves had significant meetings with God on a mountain in times past, are there with him; Jesus, the *new* law-giver and prophet, is finishing what they started. He is the next link in the chain of events by which God is making himself known to the world. The disciples' eyes are being opened to the **inner reality** of God's kingdom, and what being God's Messiah really means.

No wonder they are terrified, in the presence of something so immense, so far beyond ordinary human experience and understanding. No wonder Peter blurts out the first thing that comes into his head. It has been suggested that what he says points to the authenticity of the story - because what writer worth his salt would create such high drama, and then ruin it with a remark of such utter banality? "It's great that we're all here! Let's build three shelters for you and Moses and Elijah!" From the sublime to the ridiculous in two sentences! And yet, how like us Peter is, in his desperate attempt to rationalise the unexplainable, to bring the experience down to a level he can cope with. Maybe the sight of Moses reminds him of the great Harvest Thanksgiving festival of Tabernacles, which is celebrated by Jews to this day. They still build little temporary huts in their gardens, to remind them of the tents their ancestors lived in during their 40 years with Moses in the desert; they still decorate them with fruit and flowers in thanksgiving to God for His continuing providence. Or maybe he's thinking vaguely about *the* Tabernacle, the tent which

housed the Ark of the Covenant, and which symbolised the very presence of the God who travelled with His people to the Promised Land. Or maybe, despite his fear he just wants to prolong what he recognises as a very special and significant moment – even though he doesn't fully understand it.

But he can't. A cloud - symbolic for the Jews from time immemorial of the presence of God - covers the three figures, and from the cloud comes a voice. "**This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.**" And the implication is "Listen - even when you don't understand his talk about suffering and death, because he speaks the truth." And the truth is that God's Son has to die before he can be raised and glorified. No gain without pain. True for Jesus, true for the disciples, true for us. The Christian road is often hard – it's important when the going gets tough to listen to the Voice, and keep an eye on the glory. Something to think about as we embark on the season of Lent.

This experience isn't only important for the disciples – it's important for Jesus too. I suspect that when Peter takes such strong exception to the talk of suffering and death, there's a very human and understandable reason for the violence of Jesus' response. The old enemy, once defeated in the wilderness, has returned, speaking with the voice of a friend, offering him again the kingdoms of the world. But here on the mountain Jesus has the confirmation he needs finally to overcome that temptation. He knows that the way he has chosen is the right way, and that he has God's support and encouragement. As at his baptism, he is still the Beloved Son.

And then - the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah have gone, and only Jesus remains - the embodiment of a new way. And as the four of them go back down the mountain, Jesus tells his disciples not to talk about what they have seen, until he has risen from the dead. Of course, the first readers of Mark's gospel would know about the Resurrection, but at this point the disciples certainly don't - so despite what they have learned so dramatically about the Messiahship of Jesus, they can't yet fully understand what it means. Meanwhile they have to get on with life – they can't stay on the mountain top for ever. And that's worth thinking about too!

Twenty- one centuries on, despite **our** knowledge of the Resurrection, we often get things as wrong as the disciples did. We believe that Jesus is God's Son, but we don't always want to listen to him because his ways are not the ways of the world. We want him to fit in with our concept of God, with our ideas and plans, and the very real possibility of pain or suffering or rejection if we do things his way is not any more acceptable to us than it was to his first followers. We get confused and discouraged, and maybe wish that we, like Peter, James and John could have some sort of "mountain-top" experience to encourage us, and strengthen our faith. Well, maybe we do, not necessarily in blinding visions, but in those occasional flashes of insight when, **just for a moment**, the veil of ordinariness is drawn back and we can see the fuller reality. Here's what Tom Wright says in the final paragraph of his commentary, and it seems to me to make sense.

"We don't generally experience things as dramatic as the Transfiguration story. But each of us is called to do what the heavenly voice said: **listen to Jesus, because he is God's beloved Son.** And as we learn to listen, even if we don't always understand, even if we sometimes get scared and say all the wrong things, **we may find that**

**glory creeps up on us unawares**, strengthening us, as it did the disciples, for the road ahead."

Amen.