

Address by Bill Pattinson for Sunday, February 27th 2022

Transfiguration Sunday or the Sunday before Lent

Dad was always meticulously dressed when he attended church on Sunday morning. He expected the same from his wife and two sons. "We are going to God's house" he would say, "so, of course, we must look our best." Sunday best for dad meant jacket and tie, best white shirt with smartest detached collar and studs. Always a hat. Never a cap. Caps were for work and never to be worn on Sundays. This contrasted greatly with my dad's clothes during the week, his work clothes. Dad worked at a local factory about two miles from our home, which he covered on his push bike, cap on head, old trousers with braces, shirt with no collar and an old coat. So, on Sundays you had to say dad was transformed. "Church dad" contrasted greatly with "work dad". And somehow I still am sympathetic to Sunday best. I wouldn't dream of wearing jeans to church on a Sunday morning and I never wear my cap on Sunday. I think if I did I'd probably hear dad's voice saying, "What on earth are you wearing our Wills? It's Sunday! Go and get properly dressed." By the way, I think it's great that there is now freedom in what you wear in Church.

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does not use the term "transfigured" in his story of Jesus' glorious appearance on a mountain with Moses and Elijah. Luke simply recounts that "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." Jesus was revealed in his glory, as he was in the very presence of his father. He was transformed, or to use that word, he was "transfigured". Now I'm not saying in any way that dad was transfigured when he attended church, but because he was going to speak to God and be in the presence of God, he was transformed. His clothes were not "dazzling white", just extremely smart and, in a way, I believe his face was indeed a different face on Sundays.

So, what exactly do we take today from this story of Jesus' transfiguration and why do we hear the story just before the challenging season of Lent begins? The feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord is actually celebrated on August 6th, but the account is also traditionally read on Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before Lent. The transfiguration is one of four occasions in the Bible when Jesus is revealed in all his glory showing who he really is - God's son, the Messiah, the one who will set us all free. The other three occasions are his Baptism, his Ascension and his Resurrection.

Remember how the disciples in the Upper Room did not recognise him when he first appeared in his resurrected form - his face had changed.

Jesus climbed a high mountain with his close disciples, Peter and James and John. The three disciples were tired. It was a tough climb and it had been a very tiring, last few weeks. No wonder "they were weighed down with sleep", but they had stayed awake and...

"Suddenly they saw him the way he was,
the way he really was all the time,
although they had never seen it before,
the glory which blinds the everyday eye
and so becomes invisible."

The words of Madeleine L'Engle in her poem "Glimpses of Grace." The first real purpose of the transfiguration is to show us who Jesus really is.

Luke tells us that two men appeared with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. They also appeared in glory and were talking to Jesus about his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. On this mountain of transfiguration we see Jesus accompanied by the two greatest prophets of the Old Testament. Moses had led the great Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. Jesus was soon to experience his own Exodus from his earthly life, his crucifixion, on another mountain top, Golgotha. On this occasion he would be accompanied by two thieves, one on his left and one on his right. Jesus was preparing his disciples for his death and resurrection, which we ourselves will begin to consider as Lent starts on Wednesday of this week.

The forty days of Lent leading to Christ's passion and the events of Holy Week constitute a wonderful opportunity to pause on our faith journey; to pray realising that whether we are on the mountain top of ecstasy, or in the valley of despair or on the plateau of stability, we have just seen Jesus in his glory; a time to consider our own and perhaps others' transformations and transfigurations. He will be with us in the middle of everything; we can listen to him; we can speak to him; we can share our silences with him, seeking his glorious transfigured presence.

One of the significant details of the story, unique to Luke, is that the transfiguration occurs in the context of prayer. "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his

face changed..." This challenges us to seek something higher in prayer than mere words, to seek the powerful presence of God. Of course, glimpses of the glory of God are rare and swift, not easily put into words or shared with others. Peter tries to hold onto the situation by suggesting the building of three dwellings, but no sooner does he suggest this than a cloud covers the whole proceedings. We are also told that the disciples "kept silent and in those days told no one of the things they had seen." The transfiguration had to be experienced, not described.

"Transfiguration" is a strange churchy word, rarely used in regular conversation. It focuses on appearance. As we consider our own and others' journeys this Lent, we can reflect on how faith gives us the equipment to change how we see, how we are seen, and how we see others. We need to examine the adventure of faith; we need to reflect the glory of the transfigured Christ, for he is the light of the world. And this transfiguration, this divine transparency, transcends time and personal space. We are, I believe, always changing, discovering new light and love in ourselves. Consider, for example, the recent cultural acceptance of gay marriage or transgender people - who would have thought we would hear on TV the Olympic gold medalist, Tom Daley, after finishing his "Hell of a Homecoming" challenge for Comic Relief, say how relieved he was to receive a hug from his husband? Such transformations reflect our desire to see more clearly with the eyes of love; our desire to knock down walls and build communities of forgiveness and reconciliation.

So before the austere, strong challenge of Lent, beginning this Wednesday, let us this morning dwell in the glory of Christ's transfiguration. Let us seek in prayer and action what Malcolm Guite describes as:

"The love that dances at the heart of things
Shining out upon us from a human face."

Then we shall be transfigured!