

*Living the tension*

The story of what we call ‘the transfiguration’ which we have read this morning describes this strange event when Jesus ascends a mountain with three of his disciples and there he is transformed, as his face and garments dazzle with the glory of God. If we are to understand this story we must see it, however, as standing in tension with everything that is going on around it. This is a passage whose meaning and significance emerges out of contrast with what comes immediately before and after it.

So, if we had read the passage immediately preceding this incident we would have found Jesus speaking of his death – much to the dismay of his disciples. We would find him telling them of how he must be rejected, how he ‘has to endure great sufferings, and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes...’ That is Jesus’ fate – to be rejected. Now, however, on the mountain we hear a heavenly voice declare: ‘This is my Son, my *Chosen...*’ Here is the contrast. Rejected by the world, Jesus is nevertheless chosen by God.

Then of course there is the contrast between the mountaintop and the old, familiar world that they return to next day. For no sooner are they back in the thick of life than Jesus is met by a father pleading desperately for his only son who is seized with convulsions and tormented by an evil spirit. Again – contrast. There on the mountain Jesus had heard his Father’s voice declaring, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.’ Now he is assailed by the voice of another father, this time crying out, ‘teacher, I beg you to look at my son, he is my only child’: one Father celebrating his only Son, the other father pleading for mercy for his. The sheer discrepancy could hardly be greater. There on the mountain Jesus was in the world of transfiguration where his full identity as the Father’s Son is revealed. Here below he is in the world of disfiguration where the true identity of this other father’s son is violated and shattered.

And that contrast will be revealed even more starkly as Luke’s narrative proceeds. If we had read a little further on we would find that after this incident on the mountain Jesus ‘set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem’. Maybe the mention of Jesus’ face is deliberate – the face that had changed up there on the mountain, radiant with glory, was now set firmly towards Jerusalem, and there it would be struck and bloodied at his trial. And there in Jerusalem Jesus’

clothes that had shone with a dazzling light would be seized by soldiers who gambled for them, and the transfigured Christ would be the disfigured Christ.

So what on earth was it that was happening up there on the mountain? What is going on here? Perhaps the simplest way of explaining it would be to say that there the disciples were drawn into a place from which, for now at least, we are exiled. We have been made for that mountain. We have been made for that place where the burning love of God transfigures, bringing light to our faces. But for now we live in a contrasting world, a profane world, where the human face is disfigured by darkness. No wonder Peter wanted to hold onto the moment.

This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and if you attend a service that day what will happen is that ashes will be smeared on your faces, accompanied by the words: 'from dust you have come and to dust you shall return'. Thus begins the season of Lent. And dust and ashes are about as far away from the transfiguration as you can get. Dust and ashes speak of our mortality and our sinfulness, the dust that is our destination. Ashes smudge and soil our faces rather than making them shine. Their mark upon our brows signifies everything that works against our transfiguration in the glorious presence of God. So Transfiguration Sunday and Ash Wednesday portray a contrast - between the mountain top and the familiar world that we know only too well.

And we, you and I, live between these two worlds – between the mountain, and what lies below. We live between transfiguration and disfiguration; between glory and mortality; salvation and sin; home and exile. We live this tension, poised between these two places and the danger is that we lose sight of either. Without Lent we delude ourselves about our condition, indulging in a rosy, optimistic view of mankind, believing that we can save ourselves and ascend the mountain of progress to the sunlit uplands of the future. But without the transfiguration we become over-fixated on the pain and the suffering, and we lose faith that God is with us, and we lose hope that things can change and that evil can be cast out.

This morning we gather at this table and feel the tension. Here bread and wine remind us of a night when Jesus was betrayed; that dark night of bitter memories, smudged with sin and betrayal. Here we are reminded of a world where children are threatened by evil forces and adults cry for mercy. Here is a Lenten world of dust and ash. Yet here at this table this bread and

wine are transfigured, suffused with the presence of God. Here the glory of God is focused. Here we find God present in our midst, and for a moment we build a shelter where we meet with Jesus and feed upon his presence. Here, with the words, 'do this in memory of me', we recall God's glory broken, but for our salvation, our transfiguration, our redemption.

And then it's time to get back down the mountain, out into the world that God loves and that Jesus came to save. Amen.