

SERMON - Transfiguration

2 Kings 2: 1-12 Mark 9:2-9

The transfiguration of Christ. I was looking back over the records and realised that it was as recent as last August that our last Chaplain preached on this passage. He happened to include a particularly interesting story worthy of re-telling of a lady who had a near death experience on the operating theatre where she met God. **'Fear not'** said he **'for you will not die but go on to live another 40 years and die peacefully in old age'**. Buoyed up by this news when she recovered she went out and had cosmetic surgery, lost weight threw away her glasses for contact lenses and changed her hair colour. She went outside and got knocked down and killed by the first bus she met. When she next met God she said, **'I thought you said I would live another 40 years and die peacefully in my bed?'** **'I am really sorry'** said God **'but I am afraid that I just did not recognise that it was you!'** Transformation, transfiguration. I also realise from the records that I too have preached twice before from this pulpit on this passage so I am coming at the reading this morning from a slightly different angle.

There are two things I guess that we all share in our collective experience. They are experiences that our gospel reading touches on this morning. We all have times in our lives when, like the disciples Peter, James and John, we experience mountain top heights. Times of sheer exhilaration and pleasure. Perhaps it was the time when we first met our life partner or when we held our first child in our arms. But equally, I would suggest, we all share times when we enter deep valleys of despondency. Some of us may even be there today. Times when darkness and despondency fall upon us. Perhaps the loss of a loved one or a worrying prognosis. In reading our gospel passage this morning and in considering its context amongst the adjoining verses we realise that there is nothing new, nothing unique in our

experience. For even the disciples experienced the same highs and the same lows of life as we do.

So the question for us this morning is what can we learn from their experience that will help us to face and overcome such challenges in our lives?

Peter, James and John must have been overjoyed to have been singled out to accompany Jesus on this adventure to the mountain top. They were to accompany Jesus and to witness the transfiguration of Christ. A time when his clothes shone bright white. A time when Christ met the great law giver and great prophet of the scriptures. A time when they were there to witness the cloud and hear the voice of God. Things could not get much better for them. **'Let us build three shelters'** cries out Peter, let us preserve this moment in aspic.

But it is then that things start to go downhill. Literally. Peter gets something of a put-down from God. The inference in God's command to Peter is why are you considering Jesus as just another prophet of Salvation. Perhaps Elijah who we saw in our OT reading swept up to heaven now returned. No this Jesus is no mere law giver, no mere prophet, no **'this is my Son'**. This is the one I fore told you in those prophecies, the Saviour of mankind. And sounding almost exasperated God's final words to him were **'listen to him.'**

And if this was not enough to burst Peter's bubble Jesus then breaks in and says **'enough, we must return down the mountain'**. And the cloud lifts and the light fades and Moses and Elijah disappear and down the mountain they go.

Life can be something of a roller coaster for us too. One moment we find ourselves on a memorable mountain top experience only to sink back into the quagmire of daily living. One moment in a good position, perhaps in a time of bible study, or a praise evening or fellowship with another brother or sister in Christ. Only to sink the

next day into gloom and despondency perhaps suffering from the rebuke or hurtful comment of one we had always counted as a friend.

In coming to terms with those down times that often do follow mountain top experiences I think it is helpful to consider what happened to the disciples immediately after they left the mountain and see if there are things that we too can learn from their experience?

If we had read on in the gospel we would have discovered that on the very next day a man in the crowd shouted to Jesus ***I beg you to look at my son*** suffering from what today we might call epilepsy. He went on ***'I begged your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they could not'***. You can just imagine how the three must have felt. Only just days before the transfiguration they were returning with the other disciples rejoicing for all the healings they had done in Jesus name. And now all three of them had failed to heal this boy. ***'Why couldn't we drive the spirit out?'*** they cried to Jesus in their frustration.

But things were to reach an even lower point for these disciples. From this point on Jesus is recorded in all the gospels as preparing the disciples for the unwelcome news that he must be leaving them shortly as he set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem. Had they given up so much, had they come so far only apparently to be left abandoned by Jesus – was it to be all for nothing? They could not feel any lower, more confused, more despairing.

I have been reading recently Jonathan Aitkin's book on his mountain top and deep valley experience. You may recall that he was a successful UK politician born into a well connected political family and rose rapidly through the conservative party ranks to be made minister of defence and chief whip in the Major government. He was being tipped as a future successor to John Major as Prime Minister.

His mountain top experience could not get much higher for him. But in 1999 Jonathan was to plummet from those giddy heights to what John Bunyan described as a slough of despondency – as he pleaded guilty to a charge of perjury. For his crime he was sentenced to 18 months in prison. A divorce and bankruptcy were to follow. But at this his very lowest point whilst serving his prison sentence Jesus stepped in and Jonathan came to know Jesus as his personal saviour. His friend Chuck Colson who served time in prison himself for his part in the Watergate affair helped to guide him during this dark time. He helped him to see Jesus could take the disgrace out of his life and in turn he could do something pleasing to God. He used the time in prison to study the bible and learn Greek. Upon release he studied for two years at Oxford and graduated with distinction in theology and now writes and speaks extensively on Christian faith

Two illustrations of how mountain top experiences can so often be followed by the 'slough of despondency'. The disciples failing in their faith. Jonathan's fall from grace.

But it is so often, like for them, that at our very lowest point that Jesus reveals himself in a very real and a very dramatic and very life affirming way. Revealing himself to be our real friend, our real support and our personal saviour.

He did this to the disciples. Jesus stepped in and cured the boy that they could not. He stepped in and spent the rest of his time gently preparing them for his parting and all that must befall him. And just as the transfiguration was designed to strengthen Jesus and prepare him for his deep valley experience so it did also for the disciples.

And as for Jonathan Aitkin, Jesus stepped in and lifted him also at his lowest point and supported and guided him by sending him his emissary in the form of Colson.

So what can we learn from them? Well coming off the mountain can be a shock to the system. Descending from spiritual highs can be

confusing. We go from a place that seems like heaven to a place where you may even question if he is still there? But just because life happens, and we are no longer on the mountain top, it doesn't mean that Jesus has left us. As the psalmist said ***'Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I lie down in the deepest parts of the earth,(which some translations describe as hades) you are there also'***. It is so often that it is in those extreme situations of life, those heights, and yes, those depths that we have the opportunity to see the glory of the Lord Jesus all the more clearer. And as was for Jesus and the disciples the heights often prepare and strengthen us for these, lows.

Now this might appear over simplistic. I accept that there are times when one can only hear Jesus in these times hindsight ,looking back on those high and low points of our life at a distance and in some situations we may never fully understand this side of Glory. But we can be assured that just as Jesus came down the mountain and stayed with the three so too he comes down our mountain and remains with us no matter whatever we are to face.

Thanks be to God!

Amen