

Bedmond 06.08.17. The Transfiguration.

As you know, I tend to be healthily sceptical about stories of miracles, visions and supernatural events – (some of you may prefer to omit the word 'healthily'!) Did these things really happen as they are told? Have vivid imaginations transformed stories of natural events into miraculous or supernatural happenings? Are there natural explanations for stillings of storms or feedings of several thousands or walkings on water and the like? Did they really happen at-all or are they accounts of what people of faith might expect should happen in the lives of those they believe in?

When it comes to the Transfiguration though, however sceptical I may be, the accounts we have in the Gospels do come across as vivid eye-witness recollections of an astounding event. Little details like the feeling of being frightened when they found themselves in low cloud up on that mountain ring bells with experiences many of us have had. I can remember that feeling of being frightened when I found myself alone in thick fog, not exactly up a mountain, but in a hilly part of the South Downs and not having the faintest idea of where I was or which direction I should start walking to find where I was heading or whether just to keep still and hope the fog would lift. In the event, I walked and kept listening for sounds that might suggest road traffic or something helpful. It seemed ages before I found myself hearing traffic, heading towards it in the hopes of coming across a house or something where I could ask for help, only to find myself back exactly where I had started out some two hours or more earlier. Re-telling the story, it's that feeling of fear and being totally lost that comes back to mind – and that's what came back to mind when the three disciples involved in the Transfiguration experience recalled it to the writer of Luke's Gospel.

There are still many questions to be asked when we re-read the story. Whoever those two people were up there on the mountain with Jesus, what made the disciples think they were Moses and Elijah? I know they represent the Law and the Prophets of Jewish Scripture, but Moses lived about 1,200 years before them and Elijah about 900. How could the disciples possibly know what they looked like? How would you know if

you came across, say, the Venerable Bede from the 7th Century or Thomas Beckett from the 12th century? Apart from the strange clothes and the smell of the largely unwashed, how would you know who they were?

And why, if this experience was so important that all three Synoptic Gospels record it in such detail, only Peter, James and John? It appears to have been late at night and Luke mentions how tired they all were, so were the rest sound asleep somewhere at the bottom of the mountain? And how did the three of them and Jesus find their way down so late at night, or did they stay up there until the morning?

If you detect an element of doubt creeping into my mind about whether the incident really happened the way it's described or whether it was all some trick of the mind, the important thing to remember is that, to the Gospel writers, whatever did happen was important enough for them to devote all that space to it in their limited amount of papyrus. We take for granted that if we want to write an account of something there are almost endless supplies of paper at our disposal, but that wasn't the case for them. Papyrus and the like was in short supply and very expensive. So what was the real importance of the Transfiguration experience in the overall picture of things to do with our Faith?

The clue – as so often – lies in what the people who set the lectionary readings have omitted to tell us – the context of the story.

“About 8 days after..” or, as in Matthew and Mark's account, 6 days later – but 6 or 8 days after what exactly? Well, according to Mark and Matthew it's 6 or 8 days after what happened at a place called Caesarea Philippi.

For about two years Jesus had been following an itinerant ministry of teaching and healing in towns and villages throughout Judaea and Galilee. His disciples had stayed with him and had been astounded at some of the things that had been happening. They'd also noticed that the authorities had become more and more worried and suspicious about where this was all leading. Was this teacher/preacher/healer with a revolutionary approach to authority moving towards some sort of semi-military attempt to rebel against the Roman authorities? Did he see

himself as some sort of Messiah with delusions of power and self-importance?

Now they'd reached the village of Caesarea Philippi, just about the furthest north they would travel, only a few days walk away from Mount Hermon. While they were there Jesus asked them what people thought about him – who exactly did they think he was?

Possibly the prophet Elijah, they wondered? Everyone knew that Elijah would come back to life just before the great Messiah came – was this him? Or what about John the Baptist? Lots of people had thought that he might be the returning Elijah. He'd certainly preached like the great prophet was said to have done, but John had not been heard of for some time. Rumours had spread that he may have been executed by King Herod – there were wild stories about a suggestive dance done by his step-daughter Herodias that had got Herod so worked up that he'd offered her anything she wanted and that she'd asked for John's head on a plate! Jesus certainly looked rather like John, only not so wild-looking. Had he escaped Herod's clutches and come back better dressed to carry on his preaching ministry?

“So what do you think?” Jesus asked them, “Who do you think I am?”
“We think you are the Messiah himself!” answered Peter.

Things had got a bit strange after that. Jesus had told them not to pass that idea on to anyone else and then had spent a lot of time telling them that he was soon to be arrested and killed by the authorities. And then, ominously, he'd started to take them south as though towards the very place where just exactly that was most likely to happen – Jerusalem!

It was a few days after this that, Jesus took three of his disciples up part of a mountain with him, late in the day, to have some time apart and pray. And that's when it happened.

When you read the story in that context, it seems as though what Jesus is saying to his close followers is this:- “ You already know that people generally think I may be something special; you yourselves know that I am indeed someone special and you see me as the long-awaited Messiah. You're both right and wrong. Stay awake and I'll give you a glimpse of who I really am!”

As they looked back on it all, Peter, James and John realised that the experience they had had made them see Jesus in an entirely new light – literally. They'd always known the stories of Moses having such a shiny face after praying that he had to cover it with a cloth; and of Elijah leaving this life in such a blaze of light that it was like a 'chariot of fire'. Now here was Jesus shining so brightly that the word they used later to describe it was the same word that they used to describe the dazzling brightness of lightning.

If he had simply put it into words what Jesus appeared to be telling them was that in him was someone greater, brighter, more dazzling than even Moses and Elijah put together. In him, they were encountering one who is so much a part of God that God himself could only use words like "My Son, my very essence" – as we sing in that famous hymn "God's presence and his very self, an(d) essence all divine".

I believe that is the message of the Transfiguration to us, as to those three privileged disciples – that in Jesus we are seeing none other than God himself, living and breathing as one of us, suffering and dying as one of us, only to overcome mortality and death, as we ourselves will. It's the Christmas message all over again; it's the Prologue to John's Gospel all over again, the Gospel that didn't need to include an account of the Transfiguration because the writer had already told us that the One whose glory had been seen was none other than the Word that was with God, the Word that was God, the Word that had now become flesh, whose glory we had seen,, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

If that really is true, you can't get more dazzling than that!

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