

TRANSFIGURATION (Mark 9, 2-9)

Sunday next before Lent (15 February 2015)

What *really happened*? Give us the facts! Understandable reactions of our own questioning age to anything so extraordinary and supernatural as the transfiguration of Jesus. And well may we wonder about the facts. After all, Elijah, who appears in this incident, is said (in 2 Kings, 2) to have been taken up bodily into heaven, not just in a whirlwind, but in a horse-drawn chariot of fire! Surely we may be forgiven for thinking some imaginative hagiography has been at work to emphasize the genuine holiness of the great prophet.

But visionary appearances can be very real; and there are well-attested accounts of such experiences being shared by several people, especially if the shared circumstances are particularly intense. A 'mountaintop experience' is a byword for one that is intense, up-lifting and life-changing, and the disciples were indeed at a crossroads in their life-changing journey with Jesus. So I don't think we need be too skeptical about this reported incident, particularly in Mark's brief, un-embroidered version we have this morning.

However, 'the facts' are only half the story — well, less than half. Like all the wondrous happenings in the Gospels, they were remembered and written up not just to amaze us, not just as proof of Jesus's identity (that was seen as superficial) but to *show us something*: to teach us truths too deep for mere fact-reporting words. Let's just look at what had led up to this extraordinary event.

Half a chapter earlier Jesus had cured a blind man. But sight was restored in stages — first the man could see, but people looked like trees. After more care from Jesus, at last 'he saw everything clearly'. Physical sight restored? — maybe. Spiritual insight, 'seeing the light', by stages? — *certainly*. And the very next incident shows the same gradual enlightening at work in the disciples themselves. Remember Jesus putting the question 'Who do people say that I am?' and then 'Who do *you* say that I am?' and Peter's famous answer, 'You are the Christ' — the Messiah. Ah, he's seen the light. But not clearly. When Jesus goes on to tell them what *kind* of Messiah he is — one who will be rejected, will suffer and be killed — Peter, well-meaning but putting his foot in it as usual, will have none of it. He still cannot 'see everything clearly.'

Fast forward six days: we're told nothing about them, so the transfiguration follows straight on — Mark's way of showing us it is connected to the previous teaching. Now, on the mountain-top, they do see, with startling clarity. Jesus is transfigured, shining in glory (the Greek word is '*metamorphēthē*' — he is metamorphosed, his form changed). And what company he keeps! Elijah and Moses, the great pillars of the whole Jewish spiritual legacy. Oddly, Mark puts Elijah first, though Moses came first in time and importance — Law-bringer as well as archetypal prophet. But Elijah re-appearing was especially associated with the expected coming of the Day of the Lord, so ... *Elijah*... get it? But the main point is that although Jesus predicts his rejection and death (not at all on the CV for Messiah), nevertheless here he is, shining with a glory that can belong to none other than Messiah himself. Yet still they do not see completely clearly. Peter (of course) blurts out with the totally inappropriate suggestion of making three 'tabernacles' — improvised shelters reminding the faithful of the time in the wilderness. Already terrified, they are then overshadowed by a cloud — sign of the presence of God. From it the divine voice speaks: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.' Suddenly they notice that Elijah and Moses have faded away; the voice of God directs them to Jesus alone. To Jesus, who had so recently commanded them to 'take up their cross and follow him.' Surely they can't fail to get the message now.

One small but significant feature of Mark's narrative is the way he describes the whole event as though it's for the benefit of the three disciples. 'He was transfigured *before them*'; 'there appeared *unto them* Elijah and Moses'; 'a cloud overshadowed *them*'; the command from the cloud, to listen to Jesus, addressed directly *to them*; and 'they saw no one *with them* anymore, but only Jesus'. It's all addressed directly to the disciples, as they stumble, bit by bit, to see *clearly* what Jesus offers to them and demands of them. And in all these Gospel stories, when there's a lesson for 'the disciples', it's clear that it means not just for the three, nor just the twelve, nor the seventy... but for all would-be disciples, for you and me as we hear or read the Gospel. Their very obtuseness illuminates our own stumbling progress, shows them alongside us, struggling to get it, trying (or hesitating) to become true followers of Jesus.

We are all slow learners in this process. None of us has arrived, but that needn't stop us searching. We are unlikely to have supernatural visions; we do not have to go apart up a high mountain, though that may indeed help us see more wide and clear. Alternatively we might find ourselves enveloped in cloud on the mountain top. But it seems significant that it was when those three were lost in the terrifying cloud of unknowing, it was *then* they heard the voice speak. To draw aside sometimes, whether to Iona like the lucky few of us, or to a more accessible place of retreat, or just by making some time of quiet withdrawal on a regular basis, can be an invaluable help in our journey of the spirit, in our growth as disciples — our growth as persons.

Making that space may not come at all easily, amid the pressures of daily life. But to make at least some modest move in that direction....Well Lent is almost upon us, Lent, the time for re-assessing, for taking a wider, longer view of where we are, and where we are going.

So, if not now, when?

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