

If you had been in church on the 6th of August twelve hundred years ago, you would have found yourself in the middle of a tremendous festival, but not because there was a baptism. Those were carried out quickly and without fuss, as soon as possible after the baby was born. Infant mortality was very high, and everyone knew that the child would go to hell if it had not been baptised before it died. Fortunately, not only do we not believe that any more, but almost all babies survive those first few days and grow up to become healthy adults.

August 6th was, and is, the Feast of the Transfiguration. Back in the so-called 'Dark Ages' it was a major festival, second only to Easter in importance. There would have been processions and incense, colour and excitement. This was when God had made it absolutely clear to the three best-loved disciples that not only was Jesus his son, which he had also done when Jesus was baptised in the river Jordan, but that he was the fulfilment of everything promised in the Old Testament. He had divine status and authority. Everything that happened on that mountain had a direct link with Jewish tradition. Luke describes it in only eight verses, but what a lot he crams in!

Jesus, Peter, James and John go up on Mount Hermon. Moses had met God on Mount Sinai; Elijah on Mount Horeb. Jesus prays and his face changes, just as Moses's face shone when he spoke with God. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. They are the two most important Jewish patriarchs, representing the Law and the Prophets. In effect they are each giving Jesus a character reference. They talk about Jesus's departure – another word for departure is 'Exodus'. Moses led the Israelites on the first Exodus out of Egypt to their promised land; Jesus will lead humanity into the kingdom of heaven. Peter's typical reaction is to try to freeze the moment, offering to build three 'dwellings', or booths. This is an echo of the Jewish festival of Succoth, which celebrates harvest and the end of the journey through the agricultural year. It reminds everyone of what they have lived through and where they have come.

This time Jesus does not reprimand Peter. Instead an even more impressive authority intervenes. The cloud is the symbol of God's presence – remember the cloudy pillar during the old Exodus, and the cloud that filled the temple when it was finished. God's voice repeats the words said at Jesus's baptism. It's an awesome, mighty voice and the disciples are terrified. Jesus's true identity was first revealed to John the Baptist, the fore-runner and the last of the prophets, and now it is explicitly shown to Elijah and Moses. All three are part of the 'old order' that will be swept away by the Resurrection. Jesus must go far beyond the deeds and experiences of anything in the old tradition. So the cloud lifts, and he is again alone with the three disciples. Each of them will shortly become Christian pioneers: Peter as the first church leader, James as the first disciple to be martyred, and John as the first Christian theologian. It is such an immense revelation that even Peter is left speechless.

This is, in fact, a particularly appropriate day for a baptism, although I suspect that Catherine and Jaco may not have realised this when making all the arrangements. It's an unusual baptism in two respects. First, as far as Fr David and I can remember, it's the only time that the parents have booked the baptism several weeks before the baby has been born. (That would have been a huge risk in the Middle Ages!) The second reason it is special is that, although most of Catherine's family now live in South Africa, they have a long connection with this church. Her

maternal grandparents and great grandparents, and two great-aunts, were married here. It's lovely to have the family here to keep the connection strong. And when Catherine and her mother came to look round a few days ago, they found a family name on the war memorial and in our book of remembrance.

In a few minutes we shall baptise Ava, using words and actions which directly reflect our recognition that Jesus is the son of God, that he was baptised, and that he has been revealed to all of us as the one whom we, in the footsteps of Peter, James and John, must follow as we travel towards God's kingdom. Ava's parents and godparents will promise to lead and encourage her on that journey. We, as the representatives of the Christian family that she is joining, welcome you to St Peter's. You have come a long way, but you are not strangers. You are friends.