

Today we are celebrating Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before Lent, marking a change in our liturgical calendar. Our gospel reading marks a change too, a change in direction for Jesus and His followers, there is a turning towards Jerusalem and the cross.

It may seem strange to think of Jesus' glorification ahead of his passion, but the transfiguration witnessed by three of the disciples, provides a preview of Jesus' future glory, which will be a source of great encouragement to them as they journey through the dark days to come.

The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all record the transfiguration story, yet it is only Luke who records that they go up the mountain to pray. Throughout Luke's gospel, prayer marks decisive moments in Jesus' ministry.

It is a hard, steep, and tiring climb, and yet the effort and discomfort are worth it, they are leaving behind noise, distractions, crowds, and busy-ness and are climbing ever higher with Jesus towards peace, quiet, silence, space, and solitude, gaining a fresh and different perspective.

On the mountain top as Jesus is praying, the appearance of his face changes and his clothes become dazzling white. His dazzling white clothes speaking of His holiness. The disciples' spiritual and physical eyes are opened as they see Jesus transfigured before them. Rather than being blinded by the light the reverse is true.

Then Moses and Elijah appear. Moses representing the Law and Elijah the Prophets.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus is recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but it is only Luke who tells us what they are talking about. We are told that they spoke about Jesus' departure which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.

On seeing Moses and Elijah, impetuous Peter decides that he needs to do something, and suggests that they put up three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

He doesn't want the mountain top encounter to end.

As Peter is talking, the disciples see a cloud, representing God's presence but also his hiddenness, revealing God but also preserving the mystery surrounding Him.

The disciples then hear a voice from the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, the chosen one, the listen to Him"

This is my Son, my chosen, are echoes of the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, words which established his identity, and commissioned him for ministry. The voice from the cloud at his transfiguration, commissions him for the next stage of his journey, his journey to Jerusalem, to his betrayal and crucifixion.

Earlier Jesus had asked the disciples 'who do you say that I am?' to which Peter had replied, the Messiah. But Jesus' recent teaching about rejection, suffering, and death, didn't fit with the disciples understanding of how the things should be. I am sure that they were confused.

But the voice from the cloud urges them, "Listen to Him!" Yes, He really is the Messiah, yes, the path to the cross is the right path and all this is happening to fulfil the Law and the Prophets.

After the voice has spoken from the cloud, the disciples no longer see Moses and Elijah, they see only Jesus, we then read that the disciples kept silent and told no one of what they had seen. Yes, Peter who often spoke before thinking and James and John who frequently argued about who was the most important, yes these three kept silent!

I am sure that each of them would have loved to tell of their mountain top adventure, but they told no one until after the resurrection. Why? Perhaps then their own understanding would be more complete, and others who had not seen what they had seen would believe them!

But what does this mean for us today?

I wonder how we create space for an encounter with God. Where are our mountains of transfiguration? Do we tire easily as we journey up the mountain with Jesus? Do we, like the disciples in today's reading struggle to stay awake when we pray?

There are times when Jesus calls us to walk with him, to be alone with Him, away from the things that clamour for our attention. Just like climbing a mountain, finding time to be apart with God needs determination, perseverance, commitment, and discipline. Our steady plod can be transformational as we journey with Christ, learning from him and gaining new insights and perspectives.

Mountain tops can make us feel vulnerable and exposed yet it is often when our defences are down, and we are exhausted and vulnerable that we can encounter God and be changed and strengthen for the challenges ahead.

Are we excited at the prospect of time alone with Jesus? Do we expect fresh revelations? And when we do experience His presence in new and exciting ways, do we like the disciples want to camp there?

The disciples saw Jesus' face shining and his clothes dazzling white. How and where do we see Jesus?

The disciples were not only amazed by what they saw, they were also amazed by what they heard.

The words " Listen to Him" are not just for the disciples but for us too .

How do we hear God's voice you may ask? God loves us and longs to talk to and with us. But sometimes we can have selective hearing. To hear we need to be quiet and tune out other voices and noises. What words and voices do we need to block out to hear him more clearly?

Sometimes His voice is loud and clear, sometimes it is a still small voice inviting us to come close to hear Him in the silence.

Do we recognize his voice in the cries of the poor, the broken hearted, the lonely, the hungry, the persecuted, the orphan, the widow, the refugee?

On hearing his voice do we cry out for healing, peace, mercy, hope, grace, forgiveness, courage, compassion, for justice, for an end to hatred, suspicion and war?

What words do we long to hear him speak into our broken, warring, world today?

This morning we have journeyed with the disciples as they climb up a mountain to pray with Jesus, we have seen his glory revealed, yet like the disciples we cannot stay on the mountain far above the ache and brokenness of the world.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday marking the beginning of the season of Lent.

Today , on the brink of Lent, as the world is on the brink of all-out-war, there is this heavy sense that we are all wandering in a wilderness.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine last week may have caused us to feel numerous emotions. Anger, fear, helplessness, outrage, hopelessness, powerlessness, dread, despair, fear, and confusion, I am sure that you can identify with some if not all these emotions and a few more besides.

As we enter into the season of Lent and journey with Jesus, not up a mountain but into the barren wilderness, the wilderness need not be a place of fear and despair, it can become for us a Holy of Holies where we meet with God. The wilderness and barrenness of Lent can become for us a sacred space of Divine dialogue.

In response Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Archbishop Justin Welby reminded us that as Christians our response to a crisis must always be rooted in prayer. And so, as we enter the season of Lent, let us join with the church worldwide in earnestly praying for an outpouring of the spirit of God, that the world may once again choose peace, strengthening those international bodies that enable us to work and live together as one humanity inhabiting one world. Let us cry out in prayer for the people of Ukraine, and for the people and leaders of Russia too.