

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Good evening. For those of you I haven't met before, my name is Lorna and I've joined the parish of Tidenham whilst I train for ordination. I've come along to a couple of services at Chase recently and I'm really pleased to be speaking to you this evening.

There's a spiritual exercise from the Ignatian tradition, in which you use your imagination to view the events in a passage of scripture from the view of one of the individuals involved. When I hear Mark's account of the Transfiguration, I for one, cannot help but to put myself in Peter's shoes. It's an amazing moment. Let's be clear, it's not a vision, Jesus is really changed. He metamorphosizes, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, becoming bright and shining like the sun. The curtain is drawn back, and the three disciples get a glimpse of Jesus's divinity. He's joined by Elijah and Moses, great heroes to the Jewish people. It's an awe-inspiring sight, it's strange and indescribable and for Peter, it's a bit too much, just too overwhelming. And so, what does Peter do? When something immense and out of his comfort zone happens, that he just doesn't understand, Peter tries to bring it back into his control, he opts for safety, as safe as houses in fact, and he offers to put up some dwellings, or tents as the note in my bible says, one each for Jesus, Elijah and Moses.

And so into Peter's confusion God speaks and his message is, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'. These words, so similar to those spoken by God at Jesus's baptism, but here God addresses the disciples, and it is what Jesus has been saying about his suffering and death that they need to listen to.

In chapter 8, shortly before the transfiguration, Peter recognises that Jesus is the longed-for Messiah, but then, when Jesus tells the disciples about his suffering, death and resurrection, Peter tries to take control and he tells Jesus off. Jesus's response is confronting, he says to Peter – 'Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. Despite declaring him the Messiah, Peter doesn't understand who Jesus really is. Perhaps the disciples have their own preconceived ideas about the Messiah, and these are getting in the way. In the period between the last works of the

Old Testament and Jesus's birth there are a plethora of writings full of messianic hope. There are a variety of expectations in these - a great king like David, a conqueror, or a great prophet, and for the disciples these images do not fit with the idea that Jesus will suffer and die. So, at the Transfiguration God makes it clear who Jesus is, that the expected Messiah is more than another leader like Moses or a prophet like Elijah, or even another great king like David. Jesus is above the prophets, and he is above the Law, personified by Moses, he is the Son of God. The three disciples, who have probably become accustomed to being with Jesus, are most likely, in awe of Elijah and Moses. From childhood, they would have been taught to revere the words of Moses and heard the story of Elijah, the great prophet who did not experience death. Now the voice from the cloud, in the presence of these great men from the history of their faith, tells them to listen to Jesus. It is not that Moses and Elijah have lost their significance, but that Jesus is of such overwhelming importance that he eclipses them. Here, at this junction as Jesus starts his journey literally and symbolically towards Jerusalem and the cross, the disciples need to comprehend the power Jesus has, but even when God intercedes and speaks directly, the disciples still struggle to understand. The transfiguration is followed by Jesus again teaching them about his coming suffering and death and again they don't get it, and they won't fully, until after Jesus's death and resurrection.

A couple of months ago I listened to a recording of the actor David Suchet reading the whole of Mark's gospel and hearing it like that, the whole gospel on one sitting, it really struck me just how often the disciples do seem a bit clueless. The disciples are terribly human and vulnerable, vulnerable to getting it wrong and missing the point. We shouldn't criticise Peter for his reaction, we would do better to put ourselves in his place, to feel his fear and to experience being overwhelmed in a dramatically new situation.

So how about us? 'Listen to him!'. We listen to so many voices today, voices which seem wise and attractive—pundits, columnists, commentators, celebrities, politicians. They promise us health, wealth, and happiness, but seldom live up to the hype. Or maybe we listen too much to our own doubts, about ourselves or about God. In a cacophony of voices, where is the trustworthy voice? God's voice from the cloud says that we can always trust Jesus—'Listen to him!'. Unlike the disciples, we know the ending of the story, we know Jesus is God's Son and that he sacrificed himself for our redemption,

died and rose again. And that, as the Son of God, Jesus will ultimately defeat death.

Or do we have a different type of problem? Have we heard the story of the Transfiguration so many times that we have become blasé to just how awesome it is? Have we normalised it like Peter tries to do? Has the wonder of God, the story of His Son's life, death and resurrection lost its confronting strangeness and become too familiar? Do we take it for granted as we meet together week by week. Perhaps what we need is to enter into the story afresh. To put ourselves in the shoes of Peter, but instead of trying to contain God, to experience again His awesome presence and to hear, understand and put into action, His instruction to listen to Jesus. We won't always get it right. The disciples had Jesus with them, physically present and able to answer their questions, and they frequently didn't recognise who he was and what he was telling them. But let's appreciate anew the strange and startling reality that Jesus was and is God's Son and, in our year of worship, to listen to Him and to worship him for all he has done and is doing in our lives.