

The Transfiguration

Mountain tops have always been regarded as special places where one can be close to God. Moses received the Ten Commandments on the top of Mount Sinai, and Elijah fled to Sinai to escape being killed by Queen Jezebel. Both Law-giver and prophet were confronted by God who spoke to them out of a cloud. Earthquake, wind and fire signified God's unapproachable presence.

The disciples were exhausted after their hard climb up the mountain and we can picture them trying to wipe the sleep from their eyes as they struggled from dream to reality. They relished that experience of wonder and saw Jesus in an entirely different way. That sort of experience should happen to us all when we worship together on Sundays, but sadly it seldom does. Most people come to church not to scale the heights as mountaineers but to sit passively as others do the work. If we sleep it is usually because of boredom rather than the sheer exhaustion of struggling to get into the presence of God. The Transfiguration reminds us to scale the heights and struggle to make our worship an experience of wonder. What happens when we get to that place of divine encounter? We see Jesus Christ as he really is.

The question of identity of the man from Galilee haunted the disciples. His brilliant and authoritative teaching, his astonishing miracles, forced the question "Who is this?" The Transfiguration answered that question. A week before, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter had acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, but Jesus' prediction of suffering and death had completely confused all the disciples. The Transfiguration clears away that confusion. The divine voice, speaking from the cloud that covered God's glory, confirmed that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. The veil of Jesus' humanity was ripped apart and just for a moment the disciples saw him in his glory. Almost immediately after that Jesus was alone and restored to his earthiness and humanity. It was the Jesus they knew, but they would never think of him in the same way again.

The disciples wanted to stay on that mountain – Peter wanted to build three tents to prolong the experience, but it was not allowed. They all had to go down the mountain and continue their discipleship and take up the task of spreading the Gospel. Having spoken with God in the burning bush on Sinai, and heard the sacred name, Moses was not allowed to stay and worship. His task was to liberate those in bondage, to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to “let my people go.” Elijah who had heard “the soft whisper of a voice” on Sinai had to put aside his idea of hiding or suicide, and go down to Damascus and anoint kings and his own successor Elisha.

Visions cannot be manufactured. God grants visions to precious few. All we can do is be open. Many people are only granted a glimpse of one, or of its shadow, or perhaps share in the vision that has come to another. We all need a vision to live by, not a dreamer’s vision, but a vision with a task which empowers and allows us to do God’s will. We need to come down from the mountain to the plain of suffering humanity where we can practise our task of discipleship – to witness God’s love and care for all people.

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