



Sermon: - 11th February 2018

Light in the darkness

2 Corinthians 4: 3 - 6; Mark 9: 2 – 9

Today I invite you to come with me on a journey of the imagination as we walk up the mountain side in the company of friends. It is early morning, but the sun is up and already there is in the air the promise of the heat of the day. The light is clear, and birdsong entertains us as we walk. We are seeking quiet and peace and solitude, and the refreshing companionable silence of those closest to us. Our aim is to spend time with one another, to commune with the world around us, and in that communion to come close to the divine. We go into the hills to meet God.

Throughout history, people of faith have met God in the mountains. There is almost an instinct within us which raises our eyes to the hills, we feel deep within us that God inhabits the hills, their grandeur can inspire in us a holy awe, and we have witnesses to this experience, for others before us have encountered God in the hills.

And so we climb, quietly, contemplatively. Our most loved companion is just ahead. He has been the focus of all the attention after the many healings he has performed and we know he needs time to regain strength and composure, so we walk in his footsteps and are happy to follow.

We are talking as we walk, quietly, about the revelations of the past days. The suffering that our friend and teacher has revealed he must undergo, about his coming death. We puzzle over his words and their meaning, both for him... and for us.

And as we walk, the beautiful early morning light strengthens and becomes bright, dazzling. We look ahead and see the gleam, the glare of light too bright to gaze upon.

Jesus is standing just ahead of us, not bathed in light, but glowing, as if his very being was light, and the light spills out of him and cascades over everything nearby.

There are two figures with him, figures who were not there before, they seem to be Moses and Elijah, and we recognise that this is holy ground. We fall to our knees...

What is happening here?

Where are we..... or when are we?

This is time out of time... time beyond time... as though time had split at the seam and eternity was showing through...

On this Sunday we hear again the story of that event known as the Transfiguration of Christ. The preceding chapters in Mark's Gospel tell a series of stories of Jesus in which things happened that gave people sudden insights into who Jesus really was. Over the past few weeks we have been following people as they have had these epiphanies. From the Magi, to the baptism of Jesus, to the calling of the disciples, to the revelation that the kingdom of God has come and what that kingdom would be like, to actual demonstrations of the kingdom as Jesus healed and preached.

This story we read today then is the pinnacle of the epiphany stories. This is the one where the veil of heaven is pulled right back, and Jesus is revealed as the one in whom earth and heaven are held together.

It was a sign of God's glory...

Jesus' humanity revealing its other dimensions, its deity, and infinity opens up...

A sign of things to come ...

A foretaste of what was to be,

A little bit of heaven breaking through into the earth...

Eternity breaking into the here and now

A glimpse of the future, and of the past, here in the present...

In this incident we also see a wonderful confirmation of God's favour. The words God speaks echo the ones he spoke at the time of Jesus' baptism. "This is my son, my beloved, listen to him". And all this takes place just before the week of Jesus' Passion, just before he goes to Jerusalem to suffer and to die. The words spoken from heaven, heard in the hearts of the disciples, affirm who Jesus was and so confirm what he was about to do. The experience sustains and encourages Jesus as he moves towards that final journey which will lead to Calvary.

This experience, this sign of God's favour, gives Jesus the certainty that his path, though it was dangerous, dark and difficult, is the right path. These are the pre-crucifixion days. These are days when perhaps Jesus was beginning to realise the full implications of what was about to happen, days when he speaks frequently about his impending death. Days when perhaps he would feel his humanity keenly. This was a glimpse of the future, of what lay beyond the trials ahead. This was a

foretaste of post resurrection existence! Like a shaft of sunlight breaking through storm clouds, or flowers that bloom in winter, a sign that although things may be dark and difficult ahead, there is hope. A little bit of God's glory spilling over into the earth, at just the time and the place where it was most needed. It's no accident that this experience comes just before that last journey.

In the church we are coming to the season of Lent. This is traditionally a time of darkness, of mourning, a time of examining oneself, of fasting, of remembering Jesus and the temptations in the wilderness. A time of walking with him through these final dark days as he heads to words the cross. It is a sombre time, not a joyful one. The fact that the story of the Transfiguration comes at this point is a sign to us to remember that Easter Day lies ahead. A sign of hope to carry us through the dark days of Lent, Holy week, Good Friday. It's like a cinema trailer for features that are coming up in a few weeks' time. Today we see the trailer and the full feature arrives on Easter Sunday. Then we see what it is all about. Then we see the big picture. When we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead. When we celebrate the return of the Son to the world, in glory. When we celebrate the confirmation that his work is accomplished and that that glory, that transfiguration glory, awaits all of us at the end of time.

The light has shone in the darkness and the darkness has not put it out. A moment transfigured by the grace of God. A sign of hope.

Sometimes in life we have similar experiences. Experiences which are in many ways beyond words. Experiences which lift us out of ourselves, which give us a glimpse of something greater, something beyond ourselves. These experiences are often indescribable. We cannot capture them, nor hold on to them. There is no way to fully convey the quality of the feelings. Falling in love might be such an experience. The birth of a child. Or when we meet God for the first time. It is the kind of experience which we know that no-one can understand unless they have experienced it too. It comes with all the force of a revelation! We see things from a different perspective. Perhaps we see things from a heavenly perspective. The glory of God breaking into the here and now transforms how we see the world. The scales fall from our eyes, and we see and understand things that we never did before.

These experiences resemble transfiguration experiences. And for us, too, they can be something to hang onto in dark days whenever they come. Which of us would imagine that the first flush of love will last, or the special joy of a new child will be felt as keenly when he or she is five or ten or twenty. Or, as the old hymn has it, "Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I saw the Lord?" But we remember, and they can be beacons of hope when dark days come.

These visions of hope are things to hang onto in the dark days, but we can't avoid the dark days. We cannot stay on the mountain top and avoid the valley. After the disciples recovered from their shock, Peter said "Let's build three booths". Peter wanted to hang on to the moment, to keep it enshrined. But that wasn't the purpose of the incident. And it wasn't the way forward. We can't preserve the transcendent. We have to go down into the valley. The way to regain the mountaintop for Jesus and the disciples was to go through the crucifixion and only then the resurrection, and into eternal glory. The fulfilment of the promise of the transfiguration. In trying to preserve the mountain top they would have lost it, but in giving it up, in leaving that place and moving on, they found that they came back to it in a deeper way that was not transitory or fleeting but was a way of life, THE way of life.

In the life of the church, both nationally and here in Lennoxton, there are uncertainties ahead, but this is not the time to look back on the past, to remain, as it were, with Moses and Elijah. It is not a time to remain stuck remembering the good old days, when pews and Sunday schools were full. Neither is it the time to hold on to the present; this is not the moment to build a shrine to the good times in an effort to keep hold of them.

Rather this is the moment to redeem the legacy; to use the foundation of the past and the experience of the present as the backdrop to the future. From this point, we move forward, strengthened and enabled by what has been, into the God-light of a new opportunity. There may be dark and difficult days ahead, and the experience of those who have gone before would tell us that after the mountain top always comes the valley, but the journey will be made in the company of one who has himself trodden a difficult path and come through to a brighter day.

Let us take hope and strength from the light of our mountaintop experiences. Let us take that light and promise into our dark times, whether these are for each of us as individuals, or as a congregation. In the dark times that we face, he is there. In the troubles that we encounter, he has been there before us. And we know, we can have faith that, at the end, when we have fought and waited and suffered and prayed, the promise of the Transfiguration will be fulfilled and the glory of the Lord will be revealed.