

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Last Sunday after Epiphany-Transfiguration*

*Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020*

*It is good for us to be here*

There are moments in life when we catch a glimpse of heaven, of mystery, when the way we look at things and ourselves changes.

The Celts called them thin places, and indeed there are thin places – like Iona or on the top of mountains where the distance between earth and heaven seems paper thin.

Transformative experiences are hard to put into words, they are hard to explain, yet you know something has happened and you see things differently and it lives with you.

Often highpoints come not just in the midst of everything being happy, but mixed in with the rest of life. The day before I was ordained deacon, I was told I didn't have a job.

The transfiguration story we've heard today is one of these.

It is a rather awkward story to understand.

I think it is much easier to relate to Jesus walking around healing and teaching and upsetting the powers that be than to hear this vision.

There is something mysterious, uncontainable and mystical about it – we'd rather have our feet on the ground with stuff we can explain.

It is hard to put words on.

Well here goes.

In each of the gospels this story marks the halfway point in Jesus' ministry. It is a story that points to who Jesus is as well as what his future and ours hold.

We hear it today at the end of Epiphany, the wonderful season following Christmas, the season of light, the season of revelation where Jesus is revealed as God being with us.

Jesus leads his inner circle up the mountain – in the OT well known as places of revelation, as well as in the story about Moses meeting God in the exodus story.

So they must have expected something.

The images in this story are full of light.

Jesus is transfigured, his face shone like the sun, his clothes are dazzling white.

Even the cloud that overshadows them all is a bright cloud – in the Greek, a light filled cloud.

Here Jesus is talking to Moses and Elijah perhaps representing the law and the prophets, perhaps also as those who have seen God.

And what is Peter's response? 'It is good for us to be here'.

His bumbling human response about wanting to build things perhaps remind us of how difficult it is to put mysterious things into words, of a metamorphosis that is beyond our grasp.

Yet he grasps that it is *good* for us to be here. The word used here is also translated as beautiful.

There is something beautiful and overwhelming about this experience and how he responds to it.

In this light filled cloud God speaks echoing the words said at Jesus' baptism, 'This is my Son the beloved, with whom I am well pleased, Listen to him'.

Here is a glimpse of God's glory, of Jesus revealed as the divine one in human form.

It is good for us to glimpse this glory and yet it is not just for the mountain top.

Jesus does say to them as they descend the mountain top – to tell no one until he is raised from the dead.

This goodness has a depth that relates to Jesus' whole life and destiny. Listen to that goodness in human form and don't shy away from it, is almost what God is saying here.

This goodness and beauty also continue with them embracing them in what is ahead.

This story is nestled between the two times that Jesus has talked about his destiny as God's Son: to suffer, to die and to rise again.

The transfiguration then is a moment that relates to these other moments.

This story points us forward to the future, to Jesus' death and resurrection. It also points to God's eternal future where we will be in robes of white around God's throne.

This is a glimpse of a goodness that is not just present in beauty on the mountain top but in the journey that is to come.

So it is a beauty that is deeper than mere prettiness, but embraces us even in difficult journeys of suffering.

Beauty and light can somehow shine on us in those times.

It was Karl Barth who talked about what seems to us as ugliness, the cross, is in fact for Christians, a source of beauty.

Beauty is not just decoration but is something that can embrace suffering, and overcome evil.

There has been something of that beauty seen in the face of Paris Street and his two friends as they talked about what had happened. There was something beautiful about that inner truth and dignity hard won through the difficult struggle they have found themselves in.

The orthodox icon of the Transfiguration show Jesus transformed surrounded by light, a light that shines not only on Jesus but also on the disciples.

The reaction of the disciples to Jesus' voice is to be afraid and to fall down, overcome. In the Orthodox icons they are literally falling down the mountain.

Yet there is something very comforting about Jesus' response to them. There is a compassion and reassurance as he touches them and beckons them up. In the Icon the beams of light that shine around Jesus shine upon them too.

The beams of light shine even on disciples who misunderstand, who fall about and all of us humans, to draw us into Jesus' reality of light and transformation.

As a church we too, even in our frailty, in our fear are caught up into God's glorious light and sustained for the road ahead.

We catch a glimpse of what new life through Jesus being raised from the dead looks like.

As we pivot between this season of epiphany and the beginning of Lent we are reminded that Jesus' light is found even in the dark shadows of the cross.

This experience is there as a sign of hope to sustain and remind them and us on the way ahead.

One of the functions of worship is to remind us of this.

Worship lifts us up and hallows all of life's complex experiences and reminds us that through the suffering and death come the raising to new life and hope.

In Jesus we see what a human life fully lived looks like and what is possible for us, that we too are caught up in the light; that God became like us that we may become like God, even in our misunderstandings and in all our failings.

It is good for us to be here.

It is also good for us to listen to God's voice along the way knowing that the goodness of God accompanies us as we head down the mountain and is there even in the darkness of suffering. Jesus is God with us always.

What is it that you will carry with you in the journey of Lent to sustain you?

What practises remind you of God's mysterious beauty found even in suffering?

It is good for us to be here.

*Lectio:*  
*Exodus 24.12-18*  
*Psalm 2*  
*2 Peter 1.16-21*  
*Matthew 17.1-9*