

TRANSFIGURATION

I don't know whether you have ever climbed a mountain or indeed climbed to any high point in a surrounding landscape. As children, climbing seemed to be in-built in us. Trees or obstacles seemed to have been put there solely for our convenience, or simply to test us. But as we grew older the sense of self preservation took over and we have a tendency to leave true mountaineering to the experts, or the foolish, accepting that we do not have the skills or perhaps the overriding wish to climb something, "because it is there". After all mountaineering is dangerous.

I used to climb mountains when I lived in Mauritius. Well mountains in the European sense they were not, but given the size of Mauritius they were mountains. Each week or so, four or five of us used to set off to climb one of the peaks, partly as exercise and partly because it made a change from going to the beach! And there was a sense of achievement when you reached the summit. Often there was some reluctance to descend, for in most cases, the descent was more difficult than the ascent, but also because the views of the whole island from the summit of these peaks were spectacular. It was possible to see from south to north, from east to west, from coast to coast.

Mountains are a regular feature in the Bible. They have a special place in Jewish history. Things happen on mountains. Moses was given the commandments; Elijah had an experience with the prophets of Baal; Abraham was tested by God, to sacrifice his son on a mountain. And that specialism continued in the writings of the Gospels. The major example was Jesus' transfiguration. Mountains seemed to be symbolic places.

Peter James and John were taken by Jesus up a mountain, or a hill, as some translations have it. There they were shown something spectacular. Just as we can find our breath taken away by the panorama laid out before us when we look down from the top of a high point, so these three disciples were given an insight into Jesus' person and God's intentions.

It is good to have these moments of insight. Good to see the wider picture. A cleaner in NASA was once asked by a visitor what he was doing. The response was "I am helping to put men in space". He had a wider vision than simply his own job. People need that wider vision. It helps understanding, and helps when the down-to-earth, day-to-day, activities seem to get in the way. Jesus

realised these disciples needed this vision to give clarity and purpose to what lay before them.

They needed, as do we, those moments when we are close to God - when we are given spiritual insights that will equip us for those mundane and routine days. We need those occasions when we find ourselves close to God. And as Christians we have all had spiritual experiences. Some people might have visions, others hear voices. Some may simply have a strong feeling of well-being and of God's presence with them - times when we saw or understood with clarity - when we first came to Christ, or indeed when we seemed to be losing our way or finding life difficult. God can give us those moments that can renew, restore and refresh us for the times ahead. Often what we know about God then becomes real in our experience.

The moment of a vision can be shattering. All of a sudden we are brought up against the "otherness" of God. That was what happened to Moses before the burning bush, Isaiah in the temple, and Saul on his way to Damascus. Going with Jesus up this mountain, may, at first, have given the disciples a feeling of self-satisfaction and a little pride that they had been selected as his close friends and confidants. Then suddenly there is this great gulf; they find themselves far from him, speechless, or muttering nonsense or gibberish.

What a vision. What an insight. Peter and his two friends saw suddenly in a flash - the twinkling of an eye - a vision of their Lord and Leader clothed in Eternal Light, as though he belonged more to heaven than to earth. They saw God in the man Jesus. People who see visions are usually in a minority. They are pioneers, and pioneers are often misunderstood, misjudged and mishandled. We can only conjecture at why these three were selected for this vision. Perhaps it is because they were the only ones ready. After all it had only been a few days previously that Peter had recognised Christ as the Messiah. They were perhaps also offered this vision because their task would be to "teach, convince and subdue" those whose visions would come later.

Two other celestial figures appeared in the vision - Moses and Elijah. Why were they there and what did they represent?

As we know, Moses was a famous Hebrew statesman who led his people out of bondage to the gates of the Promised Land. But above all he was the Law-giver. He transmitted the Ten Commandments from God to the people. He negotiated the Covenant. He built up a most elaborate legal system - rules and

regulations, ordinances, ceremonies, rewards and punishments. To every Jew he was the impersonation of the Law.

Elijah was an outstanding prophet. A man who kept company with God, listened to his instructions, and then faced the people with sometimes terrible and terrifying words. ***“Thus says the Lord!”*** And whether the message was popular or unpopular he delivered it without hesitation. Whether the Word of God was a barbed shaft, or honey, the only factor he considered was that it was the Word of the Living God. He represented righteousness, social righteousness. He was a radical reformer - Rugged, ruthless, and dynamic. A Man of God who proclaimed God’s will and demanded that it should be done.

Jesus said a good deal about the Law and the Prophets. That is why, no doubt, the three disciples saw, standing on either side of the bright and glorious Son of God, Moses and Elijah - The Law and the Prophet. So let us then have a quick look at the Law and the Prophets.

The Ten Commandments have been made the foundation principle of the laws of many nations, Christian and non-Christians alike. But the ceremonial rules of Moses, the washing and purifying, the prohibitions and injunctions all seem bewildering as we look from afar. They were however an attempt to codify standards of conduct and behaviour for an unruly and unreliable people. Law-breaking was a sin in the Old Testament so, as laws were contravened, men and women were confronted by the fact of having sinned. Consciousness of sinning then was closely linked to law-abiding and law-breaking. If you transgressed the rules of ritual you were in disgrace and disfavour with God and man. Performance of religious ceremonies kept you “right with God”. If you were “within the law” you were safe.

But it does not need much imagination to see how these conditions led to abuse. When people adhere only to the letter of the law and ignore the spirit of it, moral stagnation can set in. The meticulous observance of forms and ordinances, instead of establishing social righteousness, very frequently impede progress. Prohibition in the United States in the ‘30s did not create a drink-free population, it actually created more problems than it solved. There is something in human nature that seems the devise a way of going round the law, whilst technically still obeying it. You may think you have a foolproof social, political and economic system, but the whole structure can quickly be shattered by rogues and villains who may be keeping strictly within defined rules. Rationing was designed so that all should have a fair share, but, though

in principle it might have been an excellent idea, the black-market could easily upset the apple-cart. That is what happened in Israel. The people kept to rules, made their sacrifices and said "How do you do" to God in the Temple. But profiteering, oppression of the poor, and immorality persisted.

And that is where the prophets came in. They taught that God is a moral being. He wants the love and service of righteous men and women, not mere ritual. ***"I will have mercy, and not sacrifice"***. Religious observances are nothing, mean nothing, and are worth nothing if they are performed by cold, callous and cruel people.

Prophets denounced in no uncertain terms the people who substituted ritual for righteousness and the law for love. The prophets proclaimed the gospel of individual responsibility. They said Abraham's reputation can't put you right in God's eyes. God judged Abraham on the quality of his life and faith. You will be judged on yours. In the supreme business of righteousness, you cannot be judged on your parent's or any of your ancestor's capital. A nation is made up of individuals and when individuals live the good life there can be little wrong with the nation. ***"Return to God! Come back to God!"*** was the prophet's cry. ***"He will have mercy"***. ***"Being a God of mercy and love, He wants to see evidence of your love and mercy more than any burnt offerings"***

And so the three disciples saw, standing on either side of the bright and glorious Son of God, both Moses and Elijah. The Law and the Prophet. Peter, James and John see Jesus in the centre, rising as it were between law and the prophecy. Two heavenly delegates, each representing his own sphere, join Jesus for a few ecstatic moments and converse with him.

And this vision causes Peter to break in with his gibberish. "Lord lets build three tents, one for You Lord, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Three tents - One each - One compartment for the Law, one for the Prophets, and one for Christ.

This is I suppose a common error that we have committed all down the ages. Law by itself often becomes mean and heartless and insipid. Social reform, and even individual and national righteousness may fall away if not supported by a solid foundation of law and order. Law and Prophecy need to walk hand in hand. They need to join forces and work together.

I imagine the transfigured Jesus stretching out his arms - as he ultimately did on the cross - and drawing Moses and Elijah close to Him and, as they came closer, they came closer to each other. And then Moses and Elijah were no longer visible. They were present, like stars in the daytime, but could not be seen because the Sun of God was there in splendour. If you like, Christ had "rendered all distinctions void". The disciples looked up and saw only Jesus.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said, ***"Don't think I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have come not to destroy but to fulfil!"*** To fulfil; to complete; to perfect. To absorb both the Law and the Prophets into Eternal Life, Abundant Life which he came direct from God, to bring.

Then at the point where Moses and Elijah disappear from sight and Jesus stands alone, a voice from heaven calls, "This is my beloved Son whom I have chosen - listen to Him". The disciples are afraid. Well so would we be if we heard a voice talking from a cloud or from the skies and saying, ***"Take notice of Jesus. Moses and Elijah might be talking, but you listen to Jesus! Jesus and only Jesus! Listen to Him! Fix your gaze on Him and soon you will not see Moses and Elijah at all. You will not need to. Listen to Jesus! He has the Words of Eternal Life!"***

That was the vision. How do we interpret it back at ground level as it were, in the down-to-earth situations that we face? Well I suppose that the short answer is that we must listen to God. Not simply to the Law or simply to the Prophets, but to God in Jesus Christ, who renders those "distinctions void".

And in passing, down from the mountain-top, what about our distinctions? Does Christ want us to render them void?

We have a Partnership of churches in the Stantonbury and Willen area. And yet how many people outside the walls of the church understand its significance. Are we seen as different from each other, living in separate tents? I suspect we are, but possibly our partnership is a first step towards removing those differences, or at least starting to blur the edges. You here are an example of two churches coming together and whilst we celebrate today the history and experiences that New Bradwell Methodist Church brings to this unity, it is the very fact that this coming together has occurred which is likely to be seen in a positive light by those outside the church,

I here am a Methodist lay preacher, addressing members of St James who may have arrived here from more than just Methodist and Anglican roots, yet, despite some differences, we are all of the same Church. We are the same sort of people, living in the same place. There is little difference between the types of services and meetings we hold. If we were separate denominations all worshipping in New Bradwell, then I would suggest that folk outside could be confused, if indeed they give us a thought, They would see that we are distinct bodies although we all call ourselves Christian. What impression would that leave on those who have yet to find Christ?

That is as far as I intend to travel down that path today, although the story of the transfiguration is, as I have suggested, in one sense, one of unification.

I have just finished reading the book about that famous mountaineer, George Mallory. Mallory, the mountaineer, who gained as much distinction in the mystery surrounding his death, as he did in his life. Mountaineers like Mallory found the daily routine of life difficult when the challenge has been completed, or they have had to turn back defeated. When they are once more back with both feet at ground level their attention quickly turns to another mountain and another challenge - another "fix". We too as Christians would like to go back to the mountain-top regularly. To have regular mountain-top visions if we could.

But indeed, are not these visions of God's glory available to us all the time? We walk around blind to the glory, the visions that indeed are around us, because we do not expect to find them there. I once stood at sunset with friends waiting for the start of a fire-work display. It was to begin as darkness fell. While we waited, I looked behind me and saw the sun sinking in a sea of glory and I said to my friends, "look at the sunset". No-body looked. They were waiting for a common squib.

We mortgage the joys of the present, the quiet homely joys of humdrum days, to our anticipation of some distant time of overwhelming happiness of a kind that might never come to most of us. God has not concealed His visions in some fabled El Dorado. They are around us, if we would only learn to see them in the common things.

If we want that vision deeply, in some measure we already have it. We simply need to turn and recognise His presence. Turn and listen to His voice and do whatever He tells us to do. If we obey the commands He lays upon us. Simply

be sure it is His voice and not our own. Then we will have a radiant life and a continuous vision that will support us through whatever comes our way.

And the radiant life is, after all, the attractive life. Men and women marvel and enquire when they see it. As we look for a vision of God, to raise our hopes, whether we look from the mountain-top or simply in our daily surroundings, others are also looking. And nothing moves people more to reach out for the life of God, for their own vision of his transforming power, than the vision of that life in some soul filled with His peace and shining with His joy.

AMEN