

Transfiguration

On a lonely mountain-top, about 2000 years ago a very strange thing happened. A man, accompanied by his friends, saw the heavens opened and a brilliant light flood the scene; like the hot sun emerging from behind a cloud only more so! The man shone with the light of heaven. His friends saw it happen: they were gobsmacked! They saw him glowing with a heavenly light. They heard a voice as from heaven itself.

They talked about their experience afterwards. They wrote about it afterwards. The experience changed all their lives.

The Early Church came to regard the Transfiguration of Jesus on mount Tabor, which is what we now call this event, as a very important revelation of *who* this man Jesus really is and a revelation of *what* God's purposes for mankind really are. It was an immensely significant and symbolic moment for them, which they recounted in different ways to convey fundamental truths about Jesus and about Christian discipleship.

The Transfiguration is recorded in all three synoptic gospels and in the account in Peter's second Epistle: We'll look at them one by one.

Mark's account of the Transfiguration (Mark 9 v2-10) follows his teaching on Baptism and blind men seeing. The Transfiguration is presented as the ultimate sight and insight for the Christian believer. Jesus is light and enlightenment. Mark draws clear parallels with Moses on mount Sinai, so his is an intensely Jewish picture of Jesus as the New Moses.

Sandwiched between Jesus foretelling his own *death and resurrection* and a discussion of the end-times, Mark's account also portrays Jesus as God's 'Agent of Change' for the future.

Matthew's account of the Transfiguration (Matt. 17 v1-9; today's Gospel) seems to centre on the words from heaven: "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him*". For Matthew, the Transfiguration is the revelation of Jesus as Son of God; the One to be listened to, the One to copy and to become like.

In Matthew's account, Jesus leads his disciples to share this mountain-top spiritual experience before it happens, and then *immediately* leads them back to the plain, back to normal life, where what awaits them is the path of suffering. For Matthew, spiritual experience and religious passion are inextricably linked.

Luke (Luke 9 v 28-36) adds to Mark a discussion between Moses, Elijah and Jesus about the coming events in Jerusalem. In Luke's Gospel, the Transfiguration is about Jesus as Messiah, as the fulfilment of the *Law* (to which Moses is witness) and the *Prophets* (to which Elijah is witness).

Luke further emphasises his Messianic spin by linking the Transfiguration with his account of the coming again of the Son of Man (Luke 21v27). Both events are accompanied by symbolic *clouds of mystery* in the heavens. The space between heaven and earth is **thin** on both occasions (to use a Celtic Christian concept). Shrouded in mystery, the heavens bear witness to the events on earth.

On a more human note in Luke's account, Peter tries to prolong the moment by building permanent structures to house Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But *such experiences are meant to be transitory*; the clouds of mystery close in and the moment is past. [The same point is made by the other evangelists; when the disciples looked again, the figures had disappeared.]

The Transfiguration story is used rather differently in 2 **Peter** (1 v 16-19). It is used as evidence that the apostolic faith is not founded on myth, but on historical reality. *Yes, it is fact!*, says Peter. We were there! We were *'eyewitnesses of his majesty'*. The experience may have been transitory, but it was nonetheless real.

Lent is almost upon us. Why has the lectionary put the story of the Transfiguration on the Sunday before Lent?

Lent is a time when we look more candidly than we usually do at the realities of our living and being, and at the realities of our Christian faith and stewardship: It is the time when we recall that *we are dust, and to dust shall return*. The timing of the Transfiguration theme on the Sunday before Lent, provides a vision of God to *sustain* us and to *encourage* us through what lies ahead; through our self-examination; through our contrition; and through our suffering (if that is what we are called to).

It is as if we too are led up the Mountain of Transfiguration to witness the Glory of God, albeit transiently, so that as we too are led back to the plains of daily life, we can put our lives more easily into their true spiritual context. We can be more easily encouraged and sustained in our spiritual journey through Lent.

On a mountain-top 2000 years ago, Jesus, the Son of Man, was Transfigured in the glory of God; Transfigured in the uncreated light of eternity; and encouraged to face what lies ahead.

May we too experience God's illumination and God's encouragement, to face what lies ahead for us, today and in the Lenten Season ahead.

Amen.