

Reflection for 19th February 2023 – The Sunday before Lent by Megan Cambridge

This Sunday is the last Sunday before Lent (Transfiguration Sunday) and we hear probably one of the more frequent Gospel readings in the Church's calendar. We have it again at the feast of the Transfiguration on 6th August this year.

Before we go on to look a bit more at the passage from Matthew, I just want to take off in another direction and consider how we go about approaching and interpreting what we read in the Bible; what I learned during my training to call hermeneutics - which principles to use in order to interpret the text. It's a fancy name for something important. We do need to have an approach to the Bible, and especially to the Gospels, if we are to take them as seriously as they deserve and apply their teachings to our lives in 21st century Scotland. There are a number of ways but it seems to me that to be studious in our approach is a useful starting point. As the psalmist says "Great are the works of the LORD, **studied** by all who delight in them" (Psalm 111:2).

There can be, at least in part, a notion that what matters most about stories from the Bible, especially stories that are unusual (miracles, healings or peculiar incidents like the Transfiguration) is that we believe it wholesale as is, that we think it really happened in a 21st century historical way. This is not always helpful as it runs the risk of trivialising Faith and the Bible by turning them into a 'believing contest'. It can also run the risk of impoverishing these special stories by setting them apart from everything else and pretending that the most important thing about them is that they happened. I don't think that helps either. There are all sorts of interesting textual and historical issues with stories like the Transfiguration; perhaps it was a post-Resurrection appearance that got misplaced in early manuscripts or it may be a theologically inspired parable that developed in the first century and so on. That, however, is not what matters most. At the same time, there is simply no doubt that Jesus did amazing things and that life around him was very interesting and full of surprises. That's not what matters most either. We all know that God can do the impossible.

These perplexing stories are really just like any part of the more ordinary; Jesus' teachings, his sayings about himself and about God and about the Kingdom of God. The most important thing about the Sermon on the Mount or the Parable of the Prodigal Son is not that Jesus actually said those specific words, after all, Matthew and Luke disagree about what those words are. The most important thing about them is what they mean, what they meant for the people, place and time where they were said and what they mean for us in this place and time. I'm just not sure it's enough to simply and literally believe. I think we are called to engage the struggle of trying to understand it—of trying to make it real and present for us in ways that guide and matter to our lives and to our world. The strong conviction that unusual things happened a long time ago in a place far, far away really doesn't say anything at all about our lives now no matter how hard we believe it. Such unexamined belief may well minimise or dismiss the significance of something.

Back then to the Transfiguration. This is a story about who Jesus is and what it is like to follow Jesus but mostly it's a story about hope, real hope. The Church has taught, from the very beginning, that Jesus is fully human and, at the same time, fully divine. With the passage of time, centuries of teaching, the influence of western art and some terrible films it is easier for us to think of Jesus as being divine, we get that bit really well, but perhaps we have more trouble with how that fits in with his being fully human. As we approach Lent and journey to Good Friday we grapple with the significance of that humanity for our salvation.

In his own lifetime and during the lifetime of the apostles, there was no doubt about Jesus' humanity. People saw him and talked with him and ate with him and watched him live the life of a man in first century Palestine. He didn't glow in the dark or walk around looking like an epitome of Hollywood 'godliness'. **The Transfiguration was a story about the divinity of Jesus.** It was there to remind people that this man they may have known and may have seen was more than just one more charismatic teacher. He was the beloved of God in a unique and powerful way. The full glory of the Father was part of who Jesus actually was. That is one part of what the story means, a part that was probably more important in the first century than it is today.

Another part of what the story symbolises is that Jesus was better/bigger/more than the Bible. Jesus is seen with Moses and Elijah. Moses symbolized the Law, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, which was the only Bible the apostles or the early Church knew. Elijah symbolized the Prophets, who made up most of the rest of that Bible. In this story Moses and Elijah are present (the Law and the Prophets) but they vanish and the disciples are told to listen to Jesus alone. It's one way of saying that, if you have to choose between the Law and the Prophets (the Bible of the day) or Jesus, you choose Jesus. There is a clear priority here and I think the point is not to ignore Moses or Elijah it is to show who has pride of place. Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth-century commentator says, "Moses and Elijah appeared beside [Jesus] so that they might know that he was Lord of the Prophets." That part of the story was very important to the early Church as it tried to figure out how to handle the Old Testament, and it's an important thing for us to remember, too.

Finally, a third element of the story was so obvious to the apostles and the early Church that they hardly noticed it, they just knew it in the very depths of their beings. It is an important part for us though. It is the reality that who Jesus really is cannot be known from only one picture, from only one experience, no matter how intense and glorious, or from only one perspective. Coming to know Jesus is not an event but a journey. Jesus left the mountain still a mystery and a puzzle to the disciples, who were told not to speak about this partial insight into the Lord....*"To see him fully required the whole journey; it required walking the road ahead, all of that road.... It is only by making the whole of their journey with Jesus, a journey they did not anticipate and could not have imagined, a journey that led to Golgotha and beyond, it was only by doing this that they came to realize both who Jesus really was, and how confused and incomplete any attempt to pin him down to any one moment would be. They could no more point to the Transfiguration than they could to a sleeping friend or an executed criminal and say, 'This is it, this is who he is, I've figured it all out'."* (Rev James Liggett retired Episcopal Rector, Sermon 2018)

The Gospels have so many stories and sayings because no single story or saying is enough and no one experience is enough. Day by day we learn. We can't fully know who Jesus is and what he is about until we have walked our entire journey with Jesus. The first generation of Christians knew that. The one who stands transfigured before us today, crucified on Good Friday, and raised on Easter and who is with his Church forever, is still leading us along the bumpy road down the mountain. He continues to patiently put up with our wrong turns, our stubbornness and our failures to trust enough or to love enough. The journey of faith, the journey of discovery, the journey of our lives and of the life and ministry of Jesus continue. On that journey Jesus is both our companion on the way, gradually revealing to us who he is and who he will have us be and, at the same time, to use Peter's words, he is for us "a lamp shining in a dark place," in our dark places, and in the darkness of the world. That is where our hope lies; that light will never fail us and this journey of ours will lead us safely home.

