

Sunday 11 February 2024
Sunday Next Before Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: 2 Kings 2.1-12
NT: 2 Corinthians 4.3-6
Gp: Mark 9.2-9

Today's gospel reading marks the transition point between the season of Epiphany which we have recently left behind, and the season of Lent which is about to begin. During Epiphany we saw Jesus' true identity revealed through various signs - the testimony of the shepherds and the wise men, the joy of Anna and Simeon in the temple, the solemn moment of Jesus' baptism by John, and his first miracle in Cana of Galilee. Yet today we see the most decisive and dramatic of those signs, the transfiguration.

But why, why at this point do we hear this story? How does it fit into the gospel writer's design in setting out the good news?

Just before the account of the transfiguration, Mark tells us that Jesus is with the disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi is in the far north of Israel, a mountainous country several days' journey from Galilee and close by Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in the region. And in this mountainous and remote place he asks the disciples "who do people say I am?", to which they reply, "John the baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets", but Jesus presses them - "but who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "you are the Messiah." And after giving them orders to tell no one, he talks about his impending passion, death and resurrection.

And so, it is after this that Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the high mountain. And we are told, in their presence, Jesus was transfigured. Jesus is revealed in glory, his clothes in dazzling white. Paul, in our second reading, echoes this. For it is God who said "let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

With Jesus, talking with him were Elijah and Moses. They would represent the law and the prophets. And of course, Elijah and Moses had their own experiences of God's revelation on the mountain. It was the place where Elijah fought the prophets of Baal. And Moses, who went up the mountain and came down with the tablets of stone, who led the Israelites through the wilderness to the heights of Mount Nebo looking down over the promised land which God said he would never enter.

In fact throughout the scriptures the mountain top is a setting for revelations, for the place where God speaks to man, where man meets with God. Through the 40 days of Lent, we will hear about many other mountain

tops, and vantage points, places of temptation, silence, teaching and prayer, of suffering and glory. The Mount of Temptation, the pinnacle of the temple; and Jesus being taken to a high mountain from where could be seen all the kingdoms of the world, the Mount of Beatitudes, Mount Zion, Mount Hermon, the Mount of Olives. Unnamed mountains where Jesus went to pray, the sermon on the mount, and the green hill far away. And Jesus' charge to the disciples after the resurrection, to go to the mountain where he had told them to meet him.

Today's gospel passage started "and Jesus led them up a high mountain." That's where we are today. At the foot of the mountain, with Peter and James and John, trying to digest the meaning of what Jesus talked about at Caesarea Philippi. He taught them that the Son of Man had to endure great suffering, to be rejected, by the elders, the chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to rise again three days afterwards. Our hope will be that our journey up the mountain will lead us to catch a glimpse of the Glory of God. Can you imagine that walk, and the debate they had, with each other, and with Jesus. Because they were not on their own. Jesus was with them, alongside them.

From Ash Wednesday this coming Wednesday, we will begin our ascent, not on our own. We are in company with the disciples, with all the Saints who have gone before, and with fellow travellers in St Nick's and with all Christians across the world. We will face rocky paths, and experience springs of water, the weather will be what it will be, and we may come up against some choices about the way ahead,

So, we will need to be prepared for the Lenten journey, and we will need stamina to face the challenges and climbs that lie in wait for us, therefore we need to check that we are equipped with all we'll need for the journey. A good book, plenty of Lenten devotional books around, and the good book, perhaps read one of the gospels. I recommend Mark and not just because it's the shortest, making space for quiet times for ourselves and looking out for others. Looking forward to the many sights we will see as we travel this way together, and that in arriving we may find our hope and faith renewed. In this I'm reminded of another journey of the two disciples walking to Emmaus and talking with a stranger, who made their hearts burn within them.

Fr Ray Hutchinson