

Sunday 2 March 2025
The Sunday next before Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 34.29-35

NT: 2 Corinthians 3.12 - 4.2

Gp: Luke 9.28-36[37-43a]

You could say that the story of the transfiguration is iconic. But what does it mean to call something 'iconic'? An iconic image is one that seems to draw together and express a seminal moment. It is an image that stands for something momentous, but also one that changes our perceptions of the world - potentially forever. In recent times I remember Chloe Kelly scoring the winning goal as England won the Euros, and her celebration, wildly swinging her shirt above her head. It was an image of joy in long awaited success, but also of women's unashamed empowerment, the coming of age of women's football as something that demanded respect on its own terms. In a tragic example, I think of the photo of the small child drowned on a beach: the icon of the terrible vulnerability of asylum seekers in the face of a cruel and hostile environment.

In Christian terms, an icon is also a bearer of a deeper truth. It is not just a picture. It is an *invitation*: an invitation to relationship and into a deeper mystery. The icons in our church – especially of St Nicholas and Our Lady – are invitations to all of us: to stop, to pray, to see beyond the surface. These are images that *look back at us*: with love, constancy, perhaps challenge. If you spend time with an icon in quietness, if you really give your attention to it, it can reshape you.

To call the transfiguration an icon is to look past questions of what actually happened and when. Instead, it is to approach it as an image that invites us into a deeper relationship with the mystery of Christ – and ourselves.

One way of looking at the transfiguration is that, here, heaven spills over into earth. A veil is drawn back. Jesus of Nazareth is revealed as the Son of God. We see a glimpse of his divinity, of his uncreated light. It is no surprise that the disciples were overwhelmed. But I want to suggest that we can look at this image from the other side too: not just of heaven coming down to earth, but of earth revealing its own light, its own inner truth. Through the icon we have a window into heaven. But the icon also looks back at us. It opens a window into our own hearts.

Seen in this way, the transfigured Jesus becomes an image of the self we are called to be. He shows us his divinity, but also what it means to be truly human. To be truly human is to be Christ-like: loved and loving, strong in vulnerability, unruled by empire. Time and again, the New Testament affirms this: we will be like Christ; we will be one with God; Christ lives in us. As the icon of the invisible God, he reminds us that each and every one of us, male,

female, nonbinary, gay straight, black, brown, white or whatever we may be – we are all made in that image. That is the truth of who we are. Christ comes to restore us to that truth, and open the way for it to come alive. We will grow into that image of unguarded, compassionate love in ways we cannot expect.

When the voice says of Jesus, ‘this is my Son, the beloved’, this is also being said of us. To us, God says, ‘*You* are my child. *You* are my beloved’. Of course, the disciples struggle to understand the immensity of this. They are sleepy, just as they are in the garden of Gethsemane. They struggle to understand that Jesus offers a radically different kind of power and kingdom than the one enforced by aggressive nations and empires and churches through history.

As so often, we can identify with the disciples. They echo the faltering and weakness in us all. But this is only half of the story. For the transfiguration is also an icon of what we truly are, when all that faltering is held and healed in love. If we are the disciples, we are also the one who shines, the one called beloved. We are of God’s own heart, and nothing can take that away from us.

So I find it more fruitful to think of the disciples as those dimensions of ourselves that need grace; and the transfigured Jesus as the image of who we truly are. We can see this when we think in turn about three aspects of the story: the light, the voice and the journey back down the mountain.

The light that shines is the inner light of our heart. It has never gone out. It has only been hidden, forgotten. We have built walls to protect it from fear of being wounded. The disciples represent those parts of ourselves: the disconnection, the fear, the desire to build walls, hide the light and contain what we do not understand.

The voice that speaks is the assurance in our hearts that we are beloved of God. Nothing can separate us from that love. The disciples represent those parts of us that find such love too much, too searching, too honest. They want to keep the barriers up between earth and heaven and put all sorts of gatekeepers and mediators in the way. But God has already taken up residence in your heart, and there is no duality between God’s love and yours.

The journey down the mountain is the need to integrate this way of the heart into everyday life. To connect it with our bodies, our work, our relationships, our politics. God’s light descends into the heart of the world as it descends into the heart of us. The disciples represent those parts of us which refuse to see heaven in ordinary life, who long for a grand gesture, a big leader to get us out of here and escape into fantasy.

In this way, we can see that the transfiguration on the mountain and the journey down the mountain are in fact one and the same. The same heart that is shot through with joy is the

one that is called to find love in the conflict, suffering and grief of life. And it can do this only because God is always already there, always already at the core of our hearts and world. Paul writes about this icon of Christ, full of light and grace, and he says 'All of us are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another'. This is a helpful thing to bear in mind when we read his words, which could be seen as an attack on the Jewish people. Just as the first disciples of Jesus – the foremost apostles and super-Christians of the church - find it so hard to reconnect with their own hearts, so did the people who received the law from Moses. Christians, Jews, people of all faiths are in the same boat. We are all distanced from the truth of ourselves, all resisting the glory that we are. And yet: *all* of us are called and being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another.

Take heart, then. I mean that: take heart; open yourself to your heart. The God you seek is already there. Take five, ten minutes a day to sit in silence. To sit with an icon before you or simply pictured in your mind. Allow yourself to be seen. Come back to the heart that you have forgotten. And let the words resound in your soul: 'You are my child. You are my beloved.'

Fr Steven Shakespeare