

Sunday 26th February 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		Transfiguration Sunday
Exod 24:12-18	Ps 2	2 Peter 1:16-21
		Matthew 17:1-9
IN JESUS THE FULL GLORY OF GOD IS REVEALED AND ENCOUNTERED		

“... a bright cloud suddenly cast its shadow over them, and a voice called from the cloud: ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I take delight; listen to him.’ ” (Matt 17:6)

Mountaintop experience...

Some years ago, I was climbing in the Outeniqua mountains with a group of friends. It was New Year’s Eve. We reached the mountain top. We decided to spend the night there. I have never forgotten that night. Words could not really describe it. It was utterly still. Peaceful. The moon and stars appeared. The night sky was clear and radiant with light. The rocks were bathed in moonlight. We did not need to talk. Eventually, we slept. The next morning, as the sun rose, we could see for miles. It was hard to pack up and leave. It was for me a mountaintop experience.

We speak of a mountaintop experience when something happens that is completely out of the ordinary; when we are filled with ecstasy, wonder, joy, delight; when we have a vision or a glimpse of something greater, mystical, almost magic... when we feel that we are in the presence of God... we catch a glimpse of God’s glory... and as a result we are never the same again; we emerge from that experience, we come down the mountain, changed. We see things differently. We have been transformed.

There are a number of occasions in the Old Testament when people experienced something of the glory of God. Their mountaintop experience. Moses and the elders of Israel went up the mountain into

the presence of God, but all they could see of God was what was under his feet, so overwhelming was his glory: "...they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was, as it were, a pavement of sapphire, clear blue as the very heavens..." (Ex 24:10).

We are given the picture, in the Old Testament, of the people of Israel journeying through the wilderness, very aware of the presence of God with them. The tent of meeting, pitched outside their camp. The place to which Moses would go, to meet with God – and when he emerged, his face would be shining so that the people could not look on him. The cloud of glory that guided the people by day, and the fire of God that burned at night. The presence of God.

St Paul writes of someone who "was caught up as far as the third heaven. And I know that this same man ... was caught up into paradise, and heard words so secret that human lips may not repeat them." (2 Cor 12:2-4)

It seems we are given these glimpses of wonder, majesty, the glory of God, just around the corner. Today we spend time on the mountaintop; we spend time to savour and dwell in God's presence, we open ourselves to God's glory and wonder and love. We hear the words of the Father, "This is my Son... listen to him!"

We are like children on a hot day, running through a water sprinkler or a hose, or a water slide, delighting in the cool water. Like a child delighting in a fountain of water on a hot day, today we savour and delight in the wonder and glory of God, Jesus in glory, in majesty.

Transfiguration - our readings...

And we never forget it. Years later, St Peter wrote of his experience on the mountain, with the transfigured Christ: "with our own eyes we ... witnessed his majesty." (2 Peter 1:16-17)

This Sunday of the Transfiguration comes at the end of the Epiphany season. We began the season of Epiphany with the visit of the Magi – the wise men – as they came to adore the Christ child. During this Epiphany season, through the Sunday scriptures over the past six weeks, “we have seen Jesus Christ shown to humankind, to the world, and to the entire creation. We have been given a glimpse of the cosmic dimension of the work and achievement of Christ. We move from any narrow view of an individual understanding of our faith – when it seems to be all about me – to a wider view of God’s intention for the whole of creation – when it is all about God and God’s will for us all.”¹

Transfiguration Sunday is also the Sunday before Lent. Ash Wednesday is this week. We move from the mountaintop into the wilderness with Jesus, the wilderness of desolation, the wilderness of temptation and testing. The vision of Christ in glory is given to us to carry us through the tough times of despair and emptiness.

Let’s dig a bit deeper...

There is a distinct parallel between our OT reading (Exodus 24:12-18) and the account of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9). The two readings are deliberately placed together for us to appreciate this.

“After six days” alludes to Moses’ six days on Mount Sinai, after which he saw the glory of God on the seventh day (Ex 24:15-16).

Like Moses, Jesus ascends a high mountain. Peter, James and John, who are with Jesus (17:1), match Moses’ three companions, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu (Ex 24:1, 9).

Jesus’ face shines as did Moses’ after being in the presence of God (17:2; Ex 34:29-35).

¹ ACSA Lectionary 2017

A bright cloud overshadows the mountain, and a heavenly voice speaks (17:5), just as a cloud covers Moses on Mt Sinai and God's voice is heard in thunder (Ex 19:16, 19; 24:15, 18).

Jesus' clothes become white as light (17:2); Moses' face shone after he was with God on the mountain (Ex 34:29-35).

But Jesus is greater than Moses, greater than the angels: "He is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being, and he sustains the universe by his word of power." (Heb 1:3a)

On the mountain, the transfigured Christ is joined by Moses – representing the Law; and by Elijah – representing the prophets. They are his companions. They point to him in his glory. They affirm him as Messiah, the anointed one, the one sent by God to fulfil and complete the Law and the Prophets.

The voice of the Father speaks to those present: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I take delight; listen to him." (17:5) There is a parallel with the baptism of Jesus, when the voice of the Father first spoke: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I take delight." (3:17) There is also the affirmation by the disciples a few chapters earlier, after the calming of the storm: "You must be the Son of God." (14:33); and Peter's revelation: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (16:16).

For Peter, James and John, that mountaintop experience of Christ in glory confirmed for them that in Jesus they had seen and encountered the full glory of God. Jesus is transfigured to emphasise what Matthew's Gospel has been saying about Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.

And so...

In Jesus the full glory of God is revealed and encountered.

Today we don't have to go anywhere... we are led to the mountaintop... into the presence of God... to see Christ in his glory... to hear the word of the Father, as he affirms Jesus, as He commands us to listen to the Son...

But in due time the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop will point forward, to another central event in the Gospel story. On the mountain of the Transfiguration, with only a few onlookers, in secret, we see an exalted, glorified Jesus; his garments are shining like light; standing on either side of him are two religious giants from the past. All is light.

But in time to come, in daylight, in public, we shall see a humiliated Jesus (27:32-54), whose clothes have been taken from him and divided; he will be lifted not onto a throne but onto a cross; on either side of him will not be two religious giants, but two criminals. All will be darkness.

On the mountain and at the cross of Calvary, there are three named onlookers (Peter, James, John – 17:1; Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee – 27:56). On both occasions Jesus is confessed as the Son of God – by the Father (17:6) and by the centurion (27:54); on both occasions people are “overcome with fear” (17:6; 27:54).

As the Son of God, Jesus shares in the whole range of human experience and possibilities: from glory and wonder and exaltation, to suffering and humiliation, terror and death. “He is humiliated and exalted, [he is] surrounded by saints and ringed by sinners, [he is] clothed with light and wrapped in a mantle of darkness.”²

² *The Oxford Bible Commentary* 2001, 2007: 866

CONCLUSION

We are given a foretaste of the resurrection; a glimpse of the power and coming of the kingdom – Christ n glory with his saints in light.

A great deal awaits us as we travel back down the mountain: the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality, referred to by the Minister of Finance in his recent budget speech; the call to conversion, also mentioned by the Minister of Finance, who quoted Pope Francis: “reforming the social structures which perpetuate poverty and the exclusion of the poor first requires a conversion of mind and heart”; the fear and hatred seen in the protests against foreigners in Gauteng; our daily routines at home, school, university, work.

In due course, we shall climb down the mountain – as we must – back to the everyday world. But we shall take something of the majesty and wonder and mystery of the transfiguration with us. And to our surprise, when we come to Calvary, to the place of suffering and betrayal, the place of the cross, we shall find Christ there also – in the place of our sufferings, and struggles, in the place of our desolation and our darkness. Jesus is there also.