

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Sunday before Lent

readings: [Exodus 24.12-end](#) , [2 Peter 1.16-end](#) , [Matthew 17.1-9](#)

19 February 2023

Transfiguration

Today's Bible passages all focus around the transfiguration. That incredible moment in Jesus's ministry when his closest disciples get a unique insight into who he is as they physically see something of his majesty and glory as his face shone like the sun, his clothes became as bright as light, the cloud overshadows them and the Father's voice is heard saying, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'

Each year this mysterious event breaks into the midst of our ordinary time with a flash of brilliance, excitement and joyous celebration, before we plunge from the mountain top into the depths of the wilderness as we enter into the season of Lent, the forty days and forty nights that mirror the time Moses spent on Mount Sinai encountering God's presence in the cloud and the time that Jesus spent being tempted in the wilderness.

In our Old Testament passage Moses left his people behind at the bottom of the mountain under the care and oversight of the elders . In the Gospel reading Jesus also left the majority of his disciples behind and took his inner core with him.

I wonder how this passage makes you feel when you hear it read in church each year?

Does it sound so weird and mysterious that you're tempted to sideline it – to think of it as a one-off never to be repeated experience that has little relevance to your day to day spirituality and life.

Does it make you feel jealous – if only I had been given a special experience and revelation. If only I had met God in such a way, seen something of his splendour and majesty and heard him speaking directly to me or to someone else. Does it make you question why Peter, James and John and why not me?

Does it excite you as you realise that God's desire is to break into the physical reality of our world in unusual and unexpected ways and reveal Godself to us. Does it make you eager to look out for signs of God's presence in our world today?

Does it remind you of a time in your life when you have felt the closeness of God as God has met with you, spoken into your life, revealed something of his love and presence to you?

Does it challenge you to take Jesus seriously and to listen to him and the words of Scripture and to take seriously God's commandments as you see the disciples response of fear and think of the devouring fire on the mountain top?

Does it make you wonder, well that was a necessary moment in Jesus' life and ministry, in the disciples walk of faith and in the narrative of God's engagement with the world as Jesus is made known and another aspect of his identity is revealed – but what does it mean for me? How does this impact on my life, my

faith, my relationship with God? What does it mean for the world in which we live 200 years on with all the complexities of modern living?

What can we learn about who God is, how God engages with the world and what God is inviting us into?

Who God is

These passages give us some unique glimpses into the nature of God.

The first thing I want to draw our attention to is that God is a God who desires to be with people. In Exodus the Lord instructs Moses to come to him up the mountain and God meets with Moses in the cloud. Matthew shows us Jesus spending quality time with his closest friends and inviting them to join in his relationship of prayer with the Father.

They show us that God is different to us. God meets with Moses on the mountain top, segregated from other people in the midst of a cloud in a way that is described as being like a devouring fire. Jesus is revealed as shining like the sun, bright as light, overshadowed by a cloud. God could have chosen to hide that difference from us and not allow us to see glimpses of those facets of God's being but instead chose to share that with us in a way that was manageable and safe. God's words show us something of the nature of the relationship between the Father and Jesus. 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased'

Both passages speak of God's desire to be intimately involved in our life and to help us live well and be good news for all. In Exodus God gives Moses the tablets of stone with the law and commandments God had written for our instruction. In Matthew God instructs the disciples to listen to Jesus.

How God chooses to engage with the world

There are moments of exceptional interaction where God chooses to break into the physical nature of our world and demonstrate God's glory, splendour and majesty in ways that are unmistakable but these are very much the exception.

Jesus prime way of working was with and through his disciples. Building close relationships and friendships, spending quality time together, talking together, modelling God's values and behaviours, doing things together, praying, worshipping, serving, working together.

How might the transfiguration help us live well?

The first thing I noticed about these passages was the close relationships that formed the basis of both Moses and Jesus encounter with God.

Moses set off with Joshua leaving trusted people Aaron and Hur in charge of their work. Jesus invited Peter, James and John to join him in prayer on the mountain top.

You might be aware that at the beginning of February I will be temporarily changing roles. I will leave behind my work as Bishop's Chaplain in the Bishop's Office supporting Bishop Libby and her ministry and start a six-month secondment to the Archdeacon's Office as Assistant and then Acting Archdeacon of Peak and Dales, alongside my role here as residentiary canon.

I've spent the last couple of weeks engaging in handover and transition planning and as I begin my final week my thoughts have been turning to what I want to say to the key colleagues I have worked with. The thing I have been most grateful for over the past three and a half years that Bishop Libby and I have worked together is the closeness of our relationship. We pray together daily, work together closely. She knows me better than most people and is uniquely placed to spot when I'm struggling with something or acting

uncharacteristically. I am very aware of the way in which God speaks to me and works in me through her and of God's presence in the space between us and I am deeply grateful for the closeness of our Christian community.

One of the things the passage encourages us to do is to invest in close and deep friendship with one or two others. Those relationships form the most fertile ground for God to speak to us, work within us and reveal Godself to us, through our friends.

The transfiguration reminds us to expect the unexpected. When Jesus is transfigured and Moses and Elijah appear Peter goes into practical helpful mode. We've got unexpected visitors, let's make some shelters so they can be comfortable while they stay with us. While it is good to be helpful and thoughtful and to try and meet people's practical needs Peter nearly misses the whole point.

We can be so absorbed in the practical details of daily living that we are too busy and we miss moments of divine encounter and revelation. The passages encourage us to look for signs of God's presence and activity in our world. As we prepare for the season of Lent this is an ideal opportunity to look at the balance of our life. Are there things we want to drop for a season in order to grow in discipline, prayer and faithful living and are there things we intend to take up for this season again to help us encounter God and be more available and receptive to recognising God's presence with us. If you are free on Tuesday morning Bishop Libby is hosting a quiet morning at Bishop's House to help lead us into Lent, if you'd like more information about it please ask me, there are several spaces still available.

Thirdly the passages urge us to listen to God. God wants us to know how to live well within his kingdom. He gives us the law and commandments and words of Scripture to teach us and train us in righteousness so that we might experience life in all its fullness and expand the reach of the kingdom bringing it near to those who haven't yet found it and entered into it. It matters to God that we continue to grow in our faith and learn to live in ways that please God so that we too might hear his words to us saying 'well done good and faithful servant. This is my son, this is my daughter, the beloved with whom I am well pleased.'

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